



Self-assessment Report of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education 2022

Bratislava, November 2022

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (hereinafter SAAHE or the Agency) was established by Act No. 269/2018 Coll. on Quality Assurance of Higher Education and amendment of Act No. 343/2015 Coll. on Public Procurement and amendment of certain acts, as amended (hereinafter the [Quality Assurance Act](#)). It was a significant milestone in quality assurance of higher education in Slovakia. The Agency has recently completed the first three years of its operation, and within this period, it has actively participated in disseminating a quality culture into the Slovak higher education area, in particular introducing quality assurance systems for higher education.

The initial years of SAAHE were dedicated to the issuance of Standards for Internal Quality Assurance System of Higher Education and the development of a functional internal system to successfully carry out its mission. To date, the Agency has completed more than 177 programme accreditations, as we believe, fully implementing the ESG standards (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area). Since its establishment, SAAHE has made a constant effort to improve its performance through the evaluation of the feedback on its activities. SAAHE is now also prepared to conduct the Institutional accreditation - assessment of the higher education institutions' internal quality assurance systems compliance and implementation with the Standards for the Internal System.

The above-mentioned Act, which established SAAHE obliges it to apply for membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (hereinafter ENQA) and to register with the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (hereinafter EQAR) in 2022. We are confident that the performance and activities of SAAHE that have been realized so far, provide convincing evidence and belief to successfully carry out this commitment and intention. However, the Agency will take advantage of the independent ENQA review process and its recommendations as an opportunity for further enhancement and improvement.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

The self-assessment report of SAAHE is based on the critical reflection of its more than three years of operation. The objectives of the report comprise the assessment of the Agency activities and the articulation of challenges and areas of future improvement. Thus, the main content of the report is an assessment of the fulfilment of each ESG standard, specifying its development, current status and the Agency's ambition for improvement.

The self-assessment report briefly outlines the processes of establishing the Agency's bodies, its institutional building based on its mission, values, and principles. Moreover, the adoption of internal rules, accreditation standards, and other strategic documents is described and reflected.

This document also includes the procedures of the transition period, starting from the takeover of the agenda of the former Accreditation Commission and *the assessment of correcting deficiency reports from the latest accreditations granted under the previous system, valid until 2018*. Those activities of the Agency that will no longer be carried out, references to them are graphically differentiated by typing green.

Accreditation procedures, that have already been carried out within new standards, harmonized with ESG, were analysed, as well as the agenda of complaints and appeals. Moreover, feedback from the assessed higher education institutions, reviewers, employers, and other stakeholders was considered, taking advantage of the suggestions for streamlining and optimising SAAHE processes. At the time of finalisation and submission of the self-assessment report, some of the Agency's policies, procedures, and tools are being modified and improved on the basis of the above-mentioned feedback.

The decision to develop a self-assessment report of the external quality assessment of SAAHE was approved by the Executive Board on 3 February 2022. A resolution on the structure of the report and the composition of the working group was adopted as follows:

Professor Robert Redhammer, Chair of the Executive Board
Professor René Matlovič, Deputy Chair of the Executive Board
Dr. Dušan Faktor, Head of Office
Dr. Martina Džubáková, Internal Quality Assurance Unit
Dr. Andrea Zacharová, Head of the Accreditation Department
Peter Stano, J.D., Legislative and Legal unit, Secretary of the Board of Appeal.

Naturally, input from a wider team was anticipated, according to the needs that would arise from the review process and the development of the document itself. One of the important inputs that was considered during the preparation of the report was the SWOT analysis. It was built on contributions from the Agency staff, Executive Board members and other stakeholders.

The working group has been meeting on a regular basis to follow up the preparation of specific parts of the self-assessment report and to cope with the outstanding issues in its progress. The preliminary draft of the report was submitted to the Executive Board members, the members of the Board of Appeal, the consultants as well as to the university and employer representations and other stakeholders (the Council of Higher Education Institutions, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Student Council for Higher Education Institutions, the Ministry and the employers and professional associations). The Executive Board discussed the draft SAR on 16 June 2022 and on 22 September 2022. Comments and suggestions for amendments and/or revisions were evaluated and duly considered in the next versions of the document. International consultants have also been invited to comment on the Agency's activities as well

as this report and to gain a wider perspective. The self-assessment report summarises the comments received in this way in section 7.

To conclude, the final version of the self-assessment report of SAAHE prior its submission to ENQA was approved by the Executive Board of SAAHE on 20 October 2022.

3. HIGHER EDUCATION AND QA OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE AGENCY

3.1 Brief characteristics of higher education system in Slovakia

The higher education system in Slovakia is currently based on 33 higher education institutions registered in the Slovak Republic, liable to its legal system and regulation, 20 of them are public institutions, three are state institutions, and ten are private institutions. Additionally, this system is diversified by eight branches of international higher education institutions, liable to the legal system of the state of their registration.

Public higher education institutions are public-legal and self-governing entities that can only be established and cancelled by law. The act determines their name and seat. State higher education institutions are military, police, and medical and are budgetary organisations of the respective ministry. Private higher education institutions are business entities established in the Slovak Republic for education and research and must have the approval of the government on behalf of the state to conduct their higher education activities. Branches of international higher education institutions are liable to the legislation of the state of their seat and provide higher education in the territory of the Slovak Republic based on the authorisation issued by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter the Ministry).

The basic legislative framework of the higher education system, which regulates the activities of higher education institutions, is the Act No. 131/2002 Coll. on Higher Education and on the amendment to certain acts, as amended ([the Higher Education Act](#)). The higher education area and its activities are also directly affected by other acts, e. g. Act No. 396/2012 Coll. on the Education Support Fund, Act No. 172/2005 Coll. on the Organisation of State Support for Research and Development, Act No. 422/2015 Coll. on the Recognition of Educational Certificates and the Recognition of Professional Qualifications, Act No. 53/1964 Coll. on the Awarding of Scientific Degrees and the State Commission for Scientific Degrees, and others. Moreover, the legislative area is also affected by subsequent legal norms, namely Slovak government regulations, decrees, and provisions of the Ministry. The Ministry also administrates official registers of students, study programmes, university professors, and other registers used for administration, registration, and reporting in the field of higher education. The above information is specified in detail on the [Ministry's website](#).

Higher education in the Slovak Republic is provided at three levels – bachelor's, master's/engineering, and doctoral. As of the date of this report, higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic had 3908 accredited study programmes at three levels of study in a full-time or part-time form. Study programmes are offered in 48 fields of study. This [System of Fields of Study](#) (in Slovak) was introduced by the Ministry's Decree No. 244/2019 Coll. on 1 September 2019. Since the academic year 2002/2003, a credit system reflecting the standard student workload ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) has been applied in the Slovak Republic, which represents 60 credits per academic year in the full-time form of study.

In the field of public higher education institutions, the Ministry's strategic competence is the distribution of the total disposable budget among them. The funding system is based on

the so-called Budget Allocation Methodology, which is performance based and adjusted every year on the size of the institution in terms of the number of students, graduates, publication activity, grant success, cooperation with business stakeholders, etc. The Ministry tries to complement this system with 'performance-based contracts', in which the budget (or part of it) allocated to an institution would be based on the fulfilment of specific target commitments.

The above-mentioned Higher Education Act was set up in 2002 and, although it has been amended 60 times, has not significantly changed in terms of the basic setup of the operation of the higher education system nor in terms of its boundary conditions. The only significant change has been the redefinition of the accreditation system by the adoption of a special act governing this field in 2018 – the Quality Assurance Act.

The latest amendment of the Higher Education Act, adopted in 2022, was focused mainly on the governance and management of public higher education institutions and the procedure of higher education teacher recruitment and selection. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there were no changes in the field of accreditation and quality assessment by this amendment, nor the existing deadlines were changed. Despite the fact that the latest changes were significant, further changes and/or corrections of the legislative framework are envisaged.

3.2 System of quality assurance of higher education in Slovakia

On 1 November 2018, a new act No. 269/2018 Coll. on Quality Assurance of Higher Education and on the amendment to Act No. 343/2015 Coll. on Public Procurement and on the amendment to certain acts, as amended ([the Quality Assurance Act](#)) came into force, replacing the original parts of the Higher Education Act regulating accreditation. This act completes the legal framework governing the higher education system in Slovakia as described in the previous section.

The main objective of the adopted Quality Assurance Act was to create a legislative framework for quality assurance in higher education, fully consistent with the European principles governing this area in Europe (ESG). It also guarantees that the processes taking place under the new legislation are fully compatible with the European standard.

The Quality Assurance Act established SAAHE as an independent legal entity with the necessary competencies in the field of quality assurance of higher education. These include, in particular, the assessment of the internal quality assurance system of a higher education institution, the accreditation of study programmes, and the accreditation of habilitation and inauguration proceedings. The Act requires the Agency to create and adopt Standards for Study Programmes, Standards for the Internal System, and Standards for Habilitation and Inauguration Proceeding.

The new legislative framework for quality assurance in higher education also imposes new tasks and procedures on higher education institutions themselves. The higher education institution is responsible for ensuring the quality of education through its internal quality assurance system, its implementation, and its continuous development. The internal system has to meet the standards issued by the Agency and lays down in particular the rules for establishing, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and modification of study programmes, the procedure for verifying the application of the latest knowledge in the content of the study

programmes, and how student representatives and other stakeholders are involved in the establishing and modification of the study programmes, the linking of the study programme to the relevant level of the National Qualifications Framework, the rules for the assessment of students, the rules for the implementation of the institution's research, artistic and other activities, the procedures dealing with student incentives and the procedures for verifying the sufficiency of the material, technical, informational and personal prerequisites for provision of the respective study programmes.

According to the Quality Assurance Act, each higher education institution established in the Slovak Republic is obliged to apply to the Agency for a review of its internal system and its implementation within a specified cycle, for the first time by the end of 2022 at the latest. Compliance of the internal system with the standards, its functionality, and correct implementation will result in institutional accreditation of the higher education institution in the field of study and level, and the higher education institution will thus be authorised to independently establish and modify study programmes in the relevant fields of study. The Agency also regularly monitors the compliance with the standards at least once every two years.

According to the Quality Assurance Act, SAAHE also assess the requests of a legal entity wishing to operate as a private higher education institution. This type of procedure is described as 'state approval'. The Agency applies a combination of the initial programme accreditation and the evaluation of the proposal of the internal quality assurance system of an applicant. The Agency has the right to reject the application if the proposals do not comply the standards.

4. HISTORY, PROFILE AND ACTIVITIES OF THE AGENCY

4.1 History of the agency

In the period before the adoption of the Quality Assurance Act in 2018, the tasks related to accreditation of study programmes and the so-called complex accreditation were regulated in the Higher Education Act itself. For accreditations, the applications were reviewed by the Accreditation Commission, which was an advisory body to the government of the Slovak Republic since 1993. It had 21 members and 24 permanent review panels for groups of study fields. It fulfilled two main tasks: The first task was the evaluation of applications for accreditation of a study programme. The second task was the so-called complex accreditation which corresponded to the periodic review of the level of scientific, research, and artistic activity of the institutions, supplemented by the reaccreditation of all rights granted. The Minister of Education, as a member of the government, made the actual decisions on the granting of accreditation. This was one of the most serious shortcomings in the accreditation system itself. Another disadvantage of the system was the fact that the evaluation in the Accreditation Commission was conducted in permanent review panels. This could have led to the risk of generalized evaluation procedures or conflicts of interest.

After analysing the shortcomings of the system, the Ministry proposed a new legal framework of regulation of accreditation in the form of a separate Quality Assurance Act. After difficult negotiations with the representations of higher education institutions and stakeholders, Act No. 269/2018 Coll. on Quality Assurance of Higher Education and on the amendment to Act No. 343/2015 Coll. on Public Procurement and on the amendment of certain acts, as amended (the Quality Assurance Act) was finally adopted by the National Council of the Slovak Republic in 2018. The essence of the Act is fully in line with the ESG 2015.

4.2 Mission of the agency and its organisational structure

The Agency was established as the Quality Assurance Act came into force, to act as an independent public institution conducting external quality assurance of higher education. Its [mission](#) is to contribute to the improvement of the quality of higher education in the Slovak Republic by means of external quality assurance tools according to the ESG 2015 principles and in accordance with the expectations of the stakeholders involved in higher education. The Agency provides higher education institutions with an independent expert view on the quality of education and strengthens the development of a quality culture. In particular, the Agency decides on matters relating to the granting of authorisations to higher education institutions based on their applications and conducts other related tasks as well.

The remit of the Agency and its structure are already determined by the Quality Assurance Act which identifies the Agency's internal bodies and defines their rights, duties, and basic links.

The Agency's supreme decision-making body is the [Executive Board](#), which has nine members. Each representation of higher education institutions, i.e., the Council of Higher Education Institutions of the Slovak Republic, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, and the Student Council for Higher Education Institutions, nominates two members of the Executive Board. Two members of the Executive Board are nominated by employers' representatives. The ninth

member is the Chair of the Executive Board. According to the act, the members of the Executive Board act independently and are not bound by any orders of their nominating organisations. The term of office of a member of the Executive Board shall normally be six years. The first term of office of two members has been reduced to two years and for another two members to four years by drawing lots, this is to ensure a regular and phased change of Executive Board membership.

The Chair of the Executive Board is appointed by the Minister of Education based on the results of a public selection procedure with public hearing. The selection committee for the post of Chair of the Executive Board has five members appointed by the Minister of Education. One of each member shall be nominated by the Council of Higher Education of the Slovak Republic, by the Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Student Council for Higher Education Institutions, and a representative association of employers; the fifth member of the committee shall be appointed by the Minister of Education without a proposal.

For the purpose of reviewing the procedures of the Executive Board and the review panels of the Executive Board, the Quality Assurance Act establishes another collective body – [the Board of Appeal](#). The Board of Appeal has five members and two alternates appointed and dismissed by the Minister of Education based on a public selection procedure. A member of the Board of Appeal shall act independently in the proceedings and shall not be bound by the orders of the person who proposed him or her for appointment or of the person who appointed him or her. The term of office of a member of the Board of Appeal shall be four years. The same person may serve a maximum of two terms as a member of the Board of Appeal. The procedural rules for lodging an objection by a higher education institution shall be governed by the Quality Assurance Act and the procedure for dealing with the objection shall be laid down in the [Rules of Procedure of the Board of Appeal](#).

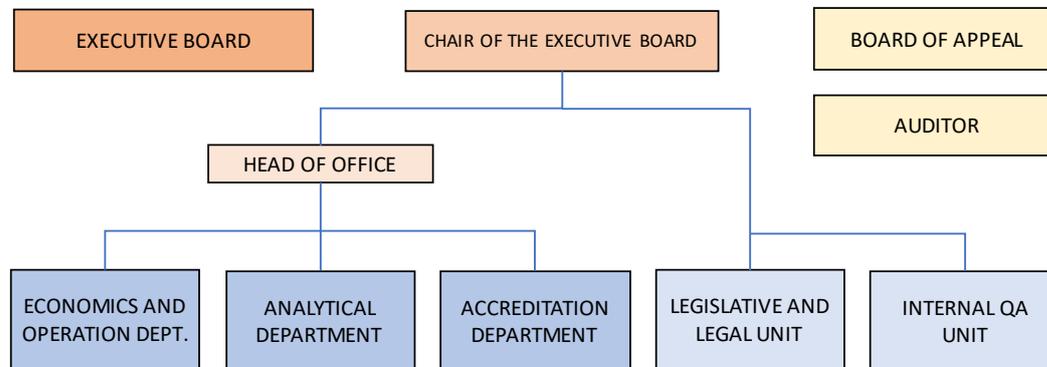
The Agency's bodies provided for in the Quality Assurance Act include the Auditor. He or she is appointed by the Minister of Education following a selection process. He or she shall, in particular, audit the Agency's management, comment on the annual report of the Agency's activities and management and make proposals for the correction of any deficiencies found.

The operation of the Agency, including administrative, technical, space and personnel management, shall be managed by the Head of Office to the extent determined by the Chair of the Executive Board. The Head of Office shall be appointed and dismissed by the Chair of the Executive Board based on the results of a public selection procedure.

In addition to the bodies whose structure is determined by the Quality Assurance Act, the Agency shall be optimally staffed with qualified employees to fully ensure its activities. As of the date of this report, the Agency had 32 staff members in employment, of whom 17 were male and 15 were female. Eight of these staff members are employed on part time contracts. The organisational structure of the Agency is laid down in the [Organisational Rules](#), which have been approved by the Executive Board. Pursuant to these rules, the structure of the Agency is organised into:

- the Accreditation Department,
- the Analytical Department,
- the Economics and Operations Department,
- the Legislative and Legal Unit,
- the Internal Quality Assurance Unit

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF SAAHE



The main tasks, job descriptions and responsibilities of the respective departments are stipulated in the Organisational Rules. Each of them is headed by a Head of Department and is accountable to the Head of Office. The Legislative and Legal Unit shall provide assistance to the other organisational units of the Agency as required and instructed by the Chair of the Executive Board. The work of the Internal Quality Assurance Unit shall be conducted by an Internal Quality Assurance Coordinator appointed and dismissed by the Chair of the Executive Board.

4.3 Activities of the Agency in the system of quality assurance of higher education in Slovakia

The Quality Assurance Act sets out the Agency's scope of activities in detail. In particular, its core competence is to decide on:

- compliance of the internal system and its implementation with the Standards for the Internal System,
- granting or not granting accreditation of a study programme,
- granting of the accreditation of the habilitation and/or inauguration procedure, its non-granting or its withdrawal,
- the imposition of a corrective measure,
- applications for state approval to operate as a private higher education institution.

The above listed competences fully cover the activities within the ESG as follow: a) and d) is institutional accreditation and respective follow up, b) is programme accreditation and e) is state approval procedure consisting of combination two previous ones. The c) stands outside of the ESG while it is not directly connected with the higher education. It is described in detail in section 5.1 – the institutional accreditation, the programme accreditation and the state approval proceedings.

The Quality Assurance Act also regulates the mutual relations between the Agency and the higher education institutions and the Ministry. It regulates diverse types of proceedings,

including those listed in the transitional provisions. A detailed description of the different activities is given in section 5.1.

The first external quality assessment procedures conducted by the Agency following the issued accreditation standards, were launched in 2021. The Quality Assurance Act allowed higher education institutions to submit applications for accreditation of new study programmes to the Agency following § 30 of the Act by the end of March 2021, even if they are already active in the respective field and level of higher education. Out of the total number of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic (33), 16 higher education institutions have made use of this possibility and have submitted 177 applications. In total, 24 fields of study were applied for. The largest number of applications was in *Economics and Management* (26 applications), followed by *Teacher Training and Pedagogical Sciences* (25 applications), *Art* (19 applications), *Earth Sciences* (13 applications), and *General Medicine* (12 applications).

Higher education institutions applied for accreditation of new study programmes at all three levels of higher education. The highest number of applications (81) was submitted at the doctoral level, 50 applications were submitted at the bachelor's level, 46 applications were submitted in master's/engineering, and one application was submitted in the joint study programme.

The structure of the Agency's implemented and planned activities is shown in the table below (green text marks services outside the ESG scope)

Service	2020	2021				2022				2023				2024				2025			
	Q1-Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4																
Verification of the results of the measures taken imposed under the regulations in force until 2018 according to § 35 (6)																					
Own-initiative proceedings according to § 35 (14)																					
Accreditation of study programmes																					
Accreditation of a study programme according to § 30 (1) of the Quality Assurance Act																					
Granting of prior approval for the modification of a study programme according to § 30 (9) of the Quality Assurance Act																					
Review of the compliance of the implementation of the study programme with the application for accreditation and the standards according to § 30 (11) and decision on withdrawal of the restriction to establish and modify study programmes in the field and level.																					
Changes to study programme data																					
Periodic review of the Internal System																					
Assessment of an application for compliance with the internal quality assurance system § 24																					
Verification of measures resulting from the order to remedy deficiencies § 26																					
Assessment of a proposal for modification of a study programme to a suspension measure § 27																					
Ordering the cancellation of the study programme and the cancellation of the programme according to § 28																					
Approval and monitoring of the action plan to the restriction on the establishment and modification of study programmes §29																					
Monitoring of the implementation of standards under § 24 (2).																					
Proceedings for extraordinary internal review system § 24 (3)																					
Compliance assessment of habilitation proceedings and inauguration proceedings																					
Proceedings for the accreditation of habilitation proceedings and inauguration proceedings																					
Withdrawal of accreditation of the habilitation proceedings and inauguration proceeding																					
Cancellation of accreditation of the habilitation proceedings and inauguration proceeding																					
Application for state approval																					

The processes of the individual activities (proceedings) are fully electronic. The Agency receives applications electronically in the Agency's information system (IS SAAHE). Guidelines on how to submit applications for external quality assurance activities are transparently published by the Agency. Further important information is provided on the Agency's website in the Frequently Asked Questions FAQ section. The detailed procedure of the stages of these processes, the decision-making, and the appeal procedure is described in sections 5 and 6.

4.4 Activities of the agency outside the ESG

The accreditation of habilitation and inauguration proceedings is a specific scope of the Agency's activity outside the ESG framework, linked to and fitting into the national context. It is something of a relic of the old system of qualification procedures for university teachers. After habilitation, the person is given the title of associate professor ("docent" in Slovak), the decree of award being granted by the rector of the university at which the habilitation took place. After inauguration, a person shall be awarded the title of professor, the title being conferred by the President of the Slovak Republic. Following the adoption of an amendment to the Higher Education Act, effective from 25 April 2022, this old system has been completely separated from the new system of university teachers' positions (jobs). However, it is confusing that the titles of the university teachers' positions are identical to the titles awarded under the previous regulation. These positions (job classifications) are occupied by public selection procedures and the law prohibits the use of the mentioned titles as a criterion in the selection process. Thus, the old system of habilitation and inauguration has lost its impact on the teaching and learning in higher education. It is maintained simply with all due respect to the academic traditions in our country.

The accreditation process of the habilitation and inauguration proceeding is initiated by the relevant higher education institution and is based on the assessment of the compliance of Standards for Habilitation or Inauguration Proceedings, issued by the Agency. Reciprocal proceedings are proceedings for withdrawal of accreditation of the habilitation and inauguration proceedings. These are proceedings initiated by the Agency itself when facts are found indicating that the higher education institution is not meeting the habilitation or inauguration standards. The Agency has initiated one proceeding to withdraw accreditation of habilitation and inauguration proceedings during its tenure to date.

The Agency also conducts other related activities, namely enhancement events – professional explanation of standards, thus increasing the understanding of the specific requirements of accreditation. During its operation, the Agency has conducted many such events with positive feedback from higher education institutions.

4.5 Activities of the agency provided in the transitional period

In the past three years, the Agency conducted activities that had been initiated under the previous accreditation system, and which were finished already.

Within 2020-2021, the Agency's main focus in the area of accreditation was on verifying the results of actions taken by higher education institutions to address deficiencies identified by the Accreditation Commission in its previous accreditation statements. These were reviews of the institution's capacity to conduct the relevant study programme or the habilitation and inauguration proceedings, which resulted from the conclusions of the accreditation under the previous legislation framework. Due to the adoption of the Quality Assurance Act and the transfer of rights and obligations from the Accreditation Commission to the Agency since 1 January 2020, the

results of the measures taken by the higher education institutions to eliminate the deficiencies according to the transitional provision of § 35 (6) of the Quality Assurance Act were reviewed and, where appropriate, verified by the Agency upon the request of the Ministry of Education, to which the higher education institutions send reports on the measures taken to eliminate the deficiencies.

The higher education institution was obliged to report to the Ministry of Education on the measures taken to eliminate the deficiencies according to the regulations in force until 31 October 2018 due to the failure to meet one or more of the criteria for the accreditation of higher education study programmes at the same time. The result of the measures taken by the institution to eliminate the deficiencies was verified by the Agency according to the criteria issued under the regulations in force until 31 October 2018.

Within 2020-2021, the Ministry of Education forwarded 299 university reports from the previous accreditation period to the Agency for processing. Of the total number of reports received by the Agency, 264 reports concerned the correction of deficiencies to the implementation of study programmes and 35 reports concerned the correction of deficiencies to the implementation of the habilitation and inauguration proceedings.

Other activities:

A total of 30 proposals for *study programmes modifications* were submitted to the Agency following the provisions of § 35 (7) of the Quality Assurance Act. Up to now, the Agency granted 26 approvals to the submitted proposals for modifications. In four cases, the Agency found that the submitted proposal of study programme modification of the institution did not create a precondition for the fulfilment of the Standards for Study Programme and requested the higher education institution to submit a new study programme modification proposal within 180 days.

The Agency initiated 9 *own-initiative proceedings* under § 35 (14) of the Quality Assurance Act. In one of the proceedings, the Agency found deficiencies and initiated a procedure for withdrawal of accreditation of habilitation and inauguration proceedings in the relevant field of habilitation and in the inauguration proceedings of the institution according to which these rights were withdrawn.

Higher education institutions submitted 646 applications to the Agency for *prior approval for study programme modification* under § 30 (9) of the Quality Assurance Act. Following the granting of prior approval by the Agency, institutions may make modifications to the relevant study programme.

All activities mentioned in this section are finished. They were limited to the transitional period by the Quality Assurance Act. The transitional period ended on 1 September 2022, thus elapsing the two years' period since the accreditation standards came into force.

4.6 International activities of the agency

Since its establishment, the international background of the Agency has been considered as an important aspect of its operation and progress. It takes advantage and inspiration from good practice examples from abroad and, if possible, given the Slovak specificities, implement them in our own system. The Agency started its work by analysing partner organisations, with the first consultations being in the neighbouring Czech Republic. Furthermore, thanks to extensive sponsorship by the Embassy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in 2019 the Agency undertook a study trip with visits to the English Quality Assurance Agency, the Office for Students, an analytical organisation, and two British universities. A more detailed study of the UK system allowed us to complete the picture of the implementation of ESG aligned systems.

The preparation of accreditation standards had several stages. In addition to public comment procedure, the working material for their text was reviewed by international experts, namely Dr. Mark Jones, who worked as an international expert at the University of Brighton, and Dr. Achim Hopbach, who worked as the Executive Director of the Austrian Accreditation Agency (Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria).

In 2019, the SAAHE welcomed the opportunity to participate in the international project *Supporting European QA agencies in meeting the ESG* ([SEQA-ESG](#)). One of the outputs, the [National Action Plan on External Quality Assurance in Higher Education](#) assists the Agency in its efforts to become an ENQA member. SAAHE is an ENQA affiliate since March 4, 2021. As part of the project, the Agency was making the most of the opportunities for active consultation on specific topics that allow for a significant improvement of the Agency's work. The outcomes of the project were summarised and reflected in the [Action Plan for the review of SAAHE](#) that was submitted to ENQA and presented at the Progress visit on 27 September at SAAHE in Bratislava.

The close cooperation between the four Visegrad Group countries (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, and Poland – V4) is long-standing. The Hungarian Accreditation Agency (Magyar Felsőoktatási Akkreditációs Bizottság) took advantage of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group and organised the first joint meeting of the V4 accreditation agencies in October 2021 in Budapest. At this meeting, the heads of the countries' accreditation agencies signed a Memorandum creating a joint forum for quality assurance of higher education in the V4 countries - the [V4QA Forum](#). The meeting also resulted in the adoption of an agreement on cooperation, potential opportunities for the creation of a common list of reviewers, mutual exchange of information, and an agreement on the possibility of staff exchange. Participants also addressed the challenges arising from structural changes in higher education. The exchange of experiences from the ENQA admission process and EQAR registration was also important for SAAHE, as two of the partner organisations are already members of these organisations. In 2022, the Slovak Republic took over the V4 presidency, so the meeting of the V4 accreditation agencies was organised by SAAHE in October 2022 in Bratislava.

Moreover, SAAHE was an active part of the OECD project ([Improving Higher Education in the Slovak Republic](#)) in 2021. This is an extensive analytical material, which includes a proposal for the reform of the higher education system in the Slovak Republic together with an action plan for its improvement.

In the report, the OECD positively reflected the approach of SAAHE and recommended continuing the implementation of internal systems in line with ESG. It also acclaimed the professional events organised for higher education institutions.

5. PROFILE, FUNCTIONING AND (EQA) ACTIVITIES OF THE AGENCY (COMPLIANCE WITH PART 3 OF THE ESG)

5.1 ESG standard 3.1 – Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

Standard 3.1

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

The Agency's mission and strategic objectives and their reflection in its day-to-day work

The mission of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education is "to contribute to the improvement of the quality of higher education in the Slovak Republic by means of external quality assurance tools according to the ESG 2015 principles and in accordance with the expectations of stakeholders involved in education. The Agency provides higher education institutions with an expert and independent view on the quality of education and fosters the development of a quality culture. In particular, the Agency decides on matters relating to the granting of authorisations to higher education institutions based on their applications and conducts other related tasks". This mission is published on the Agency's website and is fulfilled through the achievement of the Agency's strategic development objectives. These are clearly defined in the [Development Strategy of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education for the years 2022-2027](#).

The Agency has planned its goals and objectives since the early stages of its development. The first planning document was the task schedule for 2019, which was approved by the Executive Board at its second meeting on 17 April 2019. Stakeholders have been increasingly more involved in setting the Agency's goals and objectives, in particular in the consultation process for the development of accreditation standards, drafting, commenting, and approval of the standards. Moreover, stakeholders have engaged strongly in the preparation of other documents such as the Principles for the Registration in the List of Reviewers, etc.

An important contribution to the systematic development of the Agency's work was the involvement in the *Supporting European Quality Assurance Agencies in meeting ESG 2015 (SEQA-ESG)* project. Within its framework, [National Action Plan on External Quality Assurance in Higher Education](#) in the Slovak Republic was adopted and developed in cooperation with the Ministry. The objectives set out in the action plan are based on the conclusions of the meeting with ENQA and EQAR experts as well as discussions with a wide range of stakeholders (representatives of higher education institutions - Council of Higher Education Institutions of the Slovak Republic, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, representatives of students - Student Council for Higher Education Institutions and representative associations of employers - National Union of Employers). An important added value was the opportunity to compare

practices and experiences from other countries. The outcomes of these discussions were used in the preparation of the Agency's first development strategy. The aim was to systematise the planning of strategic objectives, the resulting tasks, and the evaluation of their implementation. To this end, the SAAHE adopted an [Internal Quality Assurance System for SAAHE Activities](#), according to which the strategy has been prepared for a 5-year period. Currently in force is the [Development Strategy of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education for the years 2022-2027](#), which was approved by the Executive Board on 24 February 2022. This strategy contains the vision, mission, principles of the Agency's activities, and nine strategic objectives in three areas: accreditation activities; international cooperation; and quality culture.

The value system of the Agency and its activities are determined by five principles - the principle of independence, the principle of transparency, the principle of professional and moral integrity, the principle of cooperation, and the principle of improvement. The strategic objectives are operationalised in individual actions and tasks, which are set out in the Agency's work plan. The Agency's work plan shall be drawn up for a period of one year with a view to the following year. The currently valid work plan is the [Action Plan in the form of priorities for 2022 with a view to 2023](#), which was approved by the Executive Board on 3 February 2022 and updated on 22 September 2022.

The Agency foresees the elaboration of a more detailed plan for 2023 after the conclusion of the evaluation of the feedback of other activities and after the concretization of the accreditation process (in particular, the assessment of the compliance of the internal systems of the higher education institutions) in the following year.

The Agency implements the activities stemming from the Agency's strategic objectives and work plan and continuously monitors its implementation. On each Monday, the status of the implementation of the tasks is evaluated at a coordination working meeting with the participation of the Chair of the Executive Board, the Deputy Chair of the Executive Board, the Head of Office, and the Heads of the Departments. The various departments of the Agency subsequently organise their coordination meetings with the participation of staff.

Specification of the Agency's activities within and outside the ESG and prevention of conflicts of interest

The core activities of the Agency are defined in [§ 4 \(2\) of the Quality Assurance Act](#). External quality assurance within the ESG is conducted at the institutional and programme levels, or a combination of these two. Within this frame, the Agency is also responsible for setting up a significant part of the external quality assurance system, which includes the preparation, approval, and issuance of accreditation standards and the methodology for their evaluation. The framework for the Agency's interaction and communication with higher education institutions is defined in detail in the Quality Assurance Act itself, which also regulates the procedure for proceedings, and the lodging of objections and defines the very content of the term 'internal system of the higher education institution'.

In addition to these traditional domains, the Agency's portfolio of activities also includes nationally specific activities outside the ESG framework, namely the accreditation of habilitation and inauguration proceedings. In recent years, the Agency has also conducted activities resulting from the transition from the previous accreditation system to the new

system. These included in particular the assessment of measures to remedy deficiencies identified in the previous period. Details of these activities are provided in section 4 of this report and in Chapters 3 and 6 of the Thematic Report [Changes in higher education as a result of the implementation of quality assurance systems for 2019-2021](#).

Activities of the agency within the ESG

Institutional accreditation

At the institutional level, the core activity is the assessment of the higher education institution's internal system compliance and implementation with the Standards for the Internal System. This activity follows a predefined process in which the HEIs are evaluated against a set of predefined standards. This type of procedure is further defined in [§ 24 and § 25 of the Quality Assurance Act](#). It is a proceeding conducted at the request of the institution. It also considers the fulfilment of the Standards for Study Programme, because in the compliance decision, the Agency also indicates the fields of study and levels in which the institution will be granted the right to establish, implement and modify study programmes (this is the so-called institutional accreditation). The [System of Fields of Study](#) (in Slovak) is laid down in a generally binding regulation issued by the Ministry. Institutions have to apply for an initial (first) assessment of internal systems by 31 December 2022 and for a subsequent (second) assessment by 31 December 2030. Thereafter, the Agency will assess the internal systems of the institutions periodically every six years.

At this level, the Agency also provides monitoring of the implementation of internal systems of HEIs against the Standards for the Internal System at least every two years, based on publicly available data. The agency may also start an extraordinary assessment of the internal system and its implementation. This is an agency-initiated proceeding that may be started if deficiencies are identified during the monitoring of the implementation of the Standards for the Internal System or during the assessment of the compliance of the implementation of a study programme with the Standards for Study Programme.

When the Agency determines that the internal system of the institution or its implementation does not comply with the Standards for the Internal System while the institution is a party in the proceeding, the Agency shall also impose corrective measures as part of its decision. The Agency may impose the following corrective measures: order the correction of deficiencies that cause the internal system or its implementation to be inconsistent with the Standards for the Internal System, suspend the implementation of a study programme, order the cancellation of a study programme, cancel a study programme, and restrict the competence to establish and modify study programmes. The Agency shall set a deadline for the institution to remedy the deficiencies. At the end of that period, the Agency shall assess whether the adopted measures have been effective.

Programme accreditation

At the programme level, the core activity is the accreditation of the study programme. This type of proceeding is further specified in [§ 30 of the Quality Assurance Act](#). This activity follows a predefined process in which the proposal of a study programme is evaluated against a set of predefined Standards for Study Programme. It is a proceeding conducted at the

request of a higher education institution that has not yet accredited a study programme in the relevant field of study and level. Therefore, it is an initial accreditation of a study programme, based on the assessment of the fulfilment of the Standards for Study Programme. After two years from the date of the first student's regular graduation from the study programme concerned, but at the earliest after the expiry of its standard duration from the date of the granting accreditation of the study programme, the Agency shall assess the compliance of the implementation of the study programme against the Standards for Study Programme. If the Agency confirms compliance, it shall withdraw the restriction of the HEI competence to establish a study programme in the relevant field of study and level. Moreover, the Agency shall withdraw the restriction of the respective study programme modifications.

State approval for private higher education institutions

It is a proceeding at the request of a legal entity wishing to operate as a private higher education institution. This type of procedure is described in detail in [§ 33 of the Quality Assurance Act](#) and the Agency is a party to the proceeding that is governed by the Administrative Procedure Act. The Agency applies and combines the previous proceedings - institution and programme accreditation. Thus, the Agency implements its processes of assessment of the proposed internal system compliance with the Standards for the Internal System and assesses the proposed study programmes according to the procedures for the accreditation of study programmes. In case of granting the accreditation of study programmes and confirmation of the compliance of the proposed internal system, the agency forwards the application with a statement via the Ministry of Education to the Government of the Slovak Republic for a decision on granting the state approval. Otherwise, the Agency decides to stop the state approval proceeding.

Activities of the agency outside the ESG

A specific area related to the national context outside the ESG is the accreditation of habilitation and inauguration proceedings (see more details in section 4.4 of this report). It begins on the request of a higher education institution, based on an assessment of the fulfilment of the Standards for Habilitation or Inauguration Proceedings.

Other cases are the proceedings for withdrawal of accreditation of the habilitation and inauguration proceedings. These are proceedings initiated by the Agency itself when facts are found indicating that the institution is not meeting the Standards for Habilitation or Inauguration proceedings. The Agency has initiated one proceeding to withdraw accreditation of habilitation and inauguration proceedings during its tenure to date.

In the past three years, the Agency has also conducted activities resulting from the transition from the previous accreditation system to the new one. These included, in particular, the assessment of reports from institutions on the measures taken to remedy the shortcomings identified in the previous period. The Agency assessed 299 reports, of which 264 related to study programmes and 35 to habilitation and inauguration proceedings.

The Agency also dealt with the assessment of proposals for modification of study programmes that had been suspended by institutions and also had the competence to grant prior approval for modification of a study programme. Within 2020-2021, the Agency assessed 30 proposals for study programme modifications and granted 646 prior approvals for study programme modifications.

In addition to these activities, the Agency conducts other related activities. The low awareness of ESG standards has long been a theme within higher education institutions. Therefore, the Agency organises professional events and focused explanations to improve the understanding of the requirements of the accreditation standards and to promote a quality culture in higher education institutions. Attendance at these events has been high and the response from institutions has been very positive. The Agency has also provided technical support to higher education institutions in the application process. The Agency also organised two conferences and 16 thematic events in 2019-2021. In addition, it provides answers to frequently asked questions (FAQ) of institutions on its website.

The Agency's portfolio of activities also includes analytical work. In 2021, it published two thematic reports and conducted the Academic Quarter of an Hour Student Satisfaction Survey, in which 20 056 students in first and second-level study programmes participated.

Prevention of conflicts of interest

Conflicts of interest among members of collective bodies and Agency staff are regulated in detail by the act and the Agency's internal rules. Members of the Agency's bodies must comply with the strict legal conditions set out in [§ 13 of the Quality Assurance Act](#), to prevent conflicts of interest. The Chair and the Deputy Chair of the Executive Board may not have an employment relationship with a higher education institution established in the territory of the Slovak Republic or any other employment relationship with a higher education institution established in the territory of the Slovak Republic. They may also not be members of bodies such as scientific councils of higher education institutions.

In order to prevent conflicts of interest, the Agency has adopted an internal regulation on the [Conflict of Interest Regulation of members of collective bodies, members of review panels of the Executive Board and employees of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education](#), which was approved by the Executive Board on 11 July 2019. Another internal regulation is the [Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education](#), which sets out ethical standards, moral principles, and rules of conduct for members of the Agency's collective bodies, reviewers, and members of review panels of the Executive Board of the Agency and Agency employees in the performance of their activities and in their attitudes in their assessment and decision-making, which fulfils the Agency's mission.

Stakeholder involvement in the management and activities of the agency

Stakeholder involvement in the quality assurance system of higher education in the Slovak Republic has several levels. The basic levels are the management (governance) level of the Agency and the level of the individual activities of the Agency.

Stakeholder involvement in the governance of the agency

At the level of the Agency's bodies, stakeholders are actively involved in the appointment of the Agency's bodies. The bodies of the Agency are the Chair of the Executive Board, the Deputy Chair of the Executive Board, the Executive Board, the Board of Appeal, the Auditor, and the Head of Office.

The Chair of the Executive Board shall be appointed by the Minister of Education following a public selection procedure which shall include a public hearing of candidates. The composition of the selection committee being determined by the Quality Assurance Act and consisting of nominations from stakeholders - one member each shall be nominated by the Council of Higher Education Institutions, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Student Council for Higher Education Institutions, representatives of employers and professional associations, and one member shall be nominated by the Minister of Education. The members of the Board of Appeal and the Auditor shall also be appointed by the Minister of Education following a selection process with analogous appointment of the members of the respective selection committee.

The remaining eight members of the Executive Board shall be appointed by the Minister of Education on the basis of nominations by representatives of stakeholders - two members by the Council for Higher Education Institutions, two members by the Slovak Rectors' Conference, two members by the Student Council for Higher Education Institutions and two members shall be selected by the Minister on the basis of proposals by representatives of employers, professional associations, and other relevant stakeholders.

Stakeholder involvement in the various activities of the agency

At the Agency level, stakeholders are involved in the creation and operation of review panels. The procedures for establishing the list of reviewers and review panels are formalised in the Agency's internal regulation [Principles for registration in the list of reviewers, removal from the list of reviewers and the creation of Executive Board Review Panels of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education](#), which was approved by the Executive Board on 17 September 2020. In addition to academic staff, each review panel for the assessment of a study programme or internal quality assurance system includes students and representatives of employers or professional organisations. Reviewers from abroad are normally involved in the assessment of PhD. study programmes. The Agency seeks to gradually extend the use of international reviewers to graduate study programmes. In order to strengthen the representation of international experts, the Agency uses the joint procedure of the V4 agencies, which was agreed by the agencies in the framework of the [Memorandum of Understanding](#) signed on 7 October 2021 in Budapest at the [V4QA Forum](#) meeting.

Moreover, stakeholders also participated in the process of preparation of accreditation standards and the methodology for their evaluation. Initially, the draft accreditation standards were discussed with principal stakeholders - the Council of Higher Education Institutions, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Student Council for Higher Education Institutions, the Ministry and the employers and professional associations (e.g., National Union of Employers, Alliance of Sector Councils). The outcomes of these discussions were incorporated into the official proposals. These proposals of the accreditation standards were subject to a public comment procedure. The agency received 1235 comments from 103 entities. These comments were evaluated by the agency and publicly discussed. The final wording was approved by the Executive council receiving also positive statement of the Ministry. This process, almost one year long, is described in detail in Chapter 3 of the thematic report [Changes in Higher Education as a result of the implementation of quality assurance systems 2019-2021](#).

The Agency consult key issues with international QA experts. It has an International Advisory Board as a group of experts (Dr. Mark Jones, who served as an international expert at the University of Brighton and QA review expert of The Institution of Engineering and Technology, UK, Dr. Achim Hopbach, who served as the Executive Director of the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria, in Germany, as well as the former president of ENQA and Gerald Groshek, professor at School of Business at University of Redlands, California, USA), whose mission is to provide expert advice and consultation on European policies and good practice in external quality assurance in higher education. They also provide feedback on the framework of the Agency's verification of the implementation of European ESG standards and guidelines.

Standard 3.1 – Reflection and challenges

The Quality Assurance Act gives the obligation to HEIs and to SAAHE to undertake external quality assurance activities on a regular six-year basis. SAAHE has adopted and published its mission with clear and explicit goals on its website. These are translated into the daily work of the agency. The Agency also ensures the involvement of stakeholders in its governance and work.

The Agency has adopted the practice of setting goals to achieve them. With the increasing complexity of the agenda, staffing, and organisational strength, it was necessary to systematise the activities of the Agency. In the current period, the Agency is gradually building on the processes that have been set up in the internal quality assurance system for the activities. In 2022, the Development strategy for the period 2022-2027 was adopted and approved, and from the next year 2023, this agenda should be completed with the adoption of the work plan according to the new setup.

The Agency pays great attention to the prevention of conflicts of interest among members of collective bodies. If a matter concerning a higher education institution at which a member of the Executive Board is or has been serving in the recent past is under discussion, then it declares this fact and does not engage in discussion on the matter in question.

The Agency plans to involve international reviewers more extensively in review panels to further reduce the risk of potential bias or conflict of interest. The Agency has provided and plans to provide expert advice to higher education institutions at public events in the future. There is no consultancy activity provided in relation to specific institutions and therefore the way in which the enhancement activities are carried out does not create a conflict of interest with the Agency's accreditation activities.

Stakeholders are involved in the Agency's activities at several levels. The main categories of stakeholders are students, academic staff, representatives of the management structures of the higher education institutions, and employers or professional organisations. A separate group of consultants consists of international experts. On the basis of the experience gained, the Agency decided to co-opt national and international consultants and consultants from stakeholder representatives to broaden the range of input and suggestions from stakeholders. The Agency plans to continue to propose changes of the legal framework that would optimise stakeholder participation in the governance of the Agency.

5.2 ESG standard 3.2 – Official status

Standard 3.2

Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (the Agency) was established by Act No. 269/2018 Coll. on Quality Assurance of Higher Education and on amendment of Act No. 343/2015 Coll. on Public Procurement and on amendment of certain acts, as amended (the Quality Assurance Act). The Quality Assurance Act introduced a system to independently ensure the quality of higher education in the public interest and in the spirit of the European ESG principles into the existing legislative environment regulating the activities of higher education institutions in Slovakia (consisting mainly of Act No. 131/2002 Coll. on Higher Education and other acts and regulations specified in more detail in section 3.1 of this report). This was the most significant change in this area in Slovakia, which is part of the European Higher Education Area.

The Quality Assurance Act defines the position of the Agency in the higher education system, its structure, tasks, scope, powers, responsibilities, personal provision of bodies, and its funding system. Thus, the act directly guarantees that the Agency, as an independent public organisation, has autonomous and independent decision-making powers in the field of the accreditation process and quality assessment of higher education in Slovakia. The competence of the Agency covers public, state as well as private higher education institutions located in Slovakia without any exception.

The Agency's decisions in the field of external quality assessment of higher education institutions in Slovakia are final, the Agency is not limited by any external bodies and is not subject to any other certification or authorisation processes in Slovakia or abroad. This is one of the core strengths of the Agency.

One of the first tasks of the Agency, which resulted from the Quality Assurance Act, was the preparation, consultation, approval and publication of [the Standards for the Internal System](#), [the Standards for Study Programme](#), and [Standards for Habilitation or Inauguration Proceedings](#), and the [Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards](#). The process for the adoption of this secondary legislation took place in 2019-2020. The process was comprehensive, and the Agency involved all stakeholders - HEIs representatives, employer's representatives, and students. The Agency received 1 234 comments on the standards proposal during the public comment period. Once these were processed, the standards were approved through the prescribed procedure. This created a system under which the Agency conducts its activities.

The Agency is now a stable part of the higher education system in the Slovak Republic. The provisions of the Higher Education Act, but especially the internal legislation of the higher education institutions themselves, refer to its operation. In the last two years, higher education institutions have significantly changed and systematically modified their internal legislation, especially in connection with the new accreditation system and the obligation to adopt an internal quality assurance system, which should comply with the standards issued by the Agency.

The relationship between the Agency and the higher education institutions have been affected by the latest major change to the Higher Education Act, effective from 25 April 2022. In particular, it has changed the governance system, structure, and links of the self-governing bodies of public higher education institutions. Institutions are obliged to adjust their internal regulations with the new legislation by August 2023 at the latest. Although the deadline of the obligation to align the internal system of the institutions with the standards has not been changed, it is a significant challenge for the institutions to simultaneously work on the changes to the internal legislation and prepare for the institutional review by the Agency.

The Quality Assurance Act has been amended three times since its adoption in 2018 - in 2020, 2021, and also in 2022 in connection with the aforementioned more comprehensive reform of the organisation and management of higher education institutions in particular. These amendments did not change the Quality Assurance Act in fundamental areas but removed some ambiguities, adjusted the timelines of some processes, and introduced changes based on an evaluation of knowledge in its application in practice. These amendments are evidence of the good cooperation between the Agency and the Ministry of Education, which is the carrier of the legislative initiative and has agreed the necessary changes to the Quality Assurance Act. The Agency's website contains the current version of the Quality Assurance act as amended.

A more extensive [system of internal rules and regulations](#) was necessary for the Agency to operate and perform its competencies and the powers at its disposal in a consistent manner. This legislation has been gradually built up in the Agency to its present form. It consists of thirty-two directives, regulations, and other types of standards governing internal and external procedures. Among the most important are the Statute, the Organisational Rules, the Rules of Procedure, the Schedule of Fees, and others. Internal rules and regulations (alongside the Quality Assurance Act) form an important pillar of the Agency's consistent and legally defensible decisions. They have been prepared in a prescribed manner and subsequently approved by the Executive Board. Equally important is the continuous updating of internal legislation, necessitated by external changes in the acts by which the Agency is bound, but also by feedback from application practice and the optimisation of internal processes. In 2021, the Rules of Procedure of the Executive Board, the Remuneration procedure for the members of the review panels, and the Salary regulations were updated in this way.

The legislative environment in the Slovak Republic in the field of quality assurance of higher education institutions is therefore complex. The competencies and relations between higher education institutions and the Agency are clearly defined. The procedural and temporal aspects of the different types of proceedings and quality assessment are defined in the act and specified in the Agency's internal regulations. They provide all stakeholders with the certainty and legal basis that the quality assessment of higher education will be conducted in a transparent manner, in the light of the ESG principles and in the public interest.

Standard 3.2 – Reflection and challenges

The Agency has an established legal basis given by the Quality Assurance Act and is formally recognised as quality assurance body by relevant public authorities, including the parliament, government, HEIs, and their representative organisations.

Since its establishment, the Agency has become a solid, qualitatively new part of the higher education system in the Slovak Republic. Its activities and the legitimacy of its operation are determined by the Quality Assurance Act, and it is also strongly intertwined with the provisions of the Higher Education Act, with the process of issuing secondary legislation and its modification by the Ministry (decrees, administration of registers, etc.) but mainly with the internal legislation of the higher education institutions.

The latest change to the Higher Education Act (effective from 25 April 2022), which significantly changes, in particular, the system of administration and management of higher education institutions and the system of selection and appointment of university teachers, is also a major challenge for the Agency. The higher education institutions will be obliged to gradually adjust their own internal regulations and processes in line with the new legislation (by September 2023 at the latest) and at the same time, they are obliged to ask the Agency to assess the compliance of their internal system with the standards - by the end of 2022 at the latest.

5.3 ESG standard 3.3 - Independence

Standard 3.3

Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

Organisational independence

The Agency was established by the Quality Assurance Act as an independent public institution conducting external quality assurance of higher education in Slovakia. The basic precondition for the organisational independence of SAAHE is its statutory status. The bodies of the Agency are the Executive Board, the Chair of the Executive Board, the Deputy Chair of the Executive Board, the Board of Appeal, the Auditor, and the Head of Office. [The Quality Assurance Act](#) describes in detail the nomination principles, rules, and conditions for dismissing of its members. The organisational independence of the Agency is guaranteed by the diversity of stakeholders involved in the nomination and selection of members to the respective bodies.

The Executive Board shall have nine members, including the Chair of the Executive Board and the Deputy Chair of the Executive Board. The members of the Executive Board shall be appointed and dismissed by the Minister of Education. The Minister of Education appoints two members on a proposal from the Council of Higher Education Institutions and two members on a proposal from the Slovak Rectors' Conference among persons who are internationally recognised experts in their field of activity, two members on a proposal from the Student Council of Higher Education Institutions and two members on a proposal from employers' representatives; the ninth member shall be the Chair of the Executive Board. A proposal submitted by the Council of Higher Education Institutions, Student Council of Higher Education Institutions or a proposal submitted by the Slovak Rectors' Conference may be rejected by the Minister of Education with a call for a new proposal only if the proposed candidate does not meet the conditions laid down by law.

The Board of Appeal shall have five members and two alternates appointed and dismissed by the Minister of Education. The members of the Board of Appeal shall be appointed by the Minister of Education on the basis of a public selection procedure; he shall appoint as alternates the first two unsuccessful candidates who have fulfilled the necessary requirements and criteria for the post of the Board of Appeal member.

The Auditor shall be appointed by the Minister of Education on the basis of the results of the public selection procedure and dismissed by the Minister of Education.

The Head of the Office shall be appointed and dismissed by the Chair of the Executive Board. The Head of the Office shall be appointed by the Chair of the Executive Board on the basis of the results of a public selection procedure.

The Minister of Education may dismiss a member of the Executive Board on a proposal from the Executive Board or the Auditor if the respective authority finds that a member of the Executive Board has infringed the legislation or internal rules of the Agency in connection with the performance of his duties. The Executive Board may dismiss the Head of Office if it finds out, that in connection with the performance of his duties, he or she has infringed the legislation or internal rules of the Agency. The Minister of Education may dismiss a member of the Board of Appeal or the Auditor if he finds out, that in connection with the performance of his duties, he has infringed the legislation or internal rules of the Agency.

Operational independence

SAAHE is fully independent in managing its staff. The agency is free to determine the number of employees, and autonomously selects suitable candidates in accordance with current needs and tasks.

SAAHE is also fully independent in defining its own procedures and methodologies and in the recruitment, nomination, and appointment of experts. Procedural decisions are taken by the Executive Board. For each proceeding, according to its nature, the Executive Board approves the composition of the Executive Board Review Panels, which is formed from a public [list of reviewers](#). The Agency has established and maintains a list of reviewers and selects suitable candidates on the basis of predetermined and published principles, rules and criteria - [Principles for Registration in the List of Reviewers, Removal from the List of Reviewers and the Creation of Executive Board Review Panels](#), which was created and approved by the Executive Board. The Executive Board shall decide on the inclusion and removal of a person from the list of reviewers and also decides on the composition of the review panel. Before the actual start of a proceeding, the higher education institution shall have the right to challenge the bias of an individual member of the panel. If justified, the composition of the review panel shall be changed by the appointment of another reviewer. However, the final decision lies upon the Executive Board. Subsequently, the autonomous work of the review panel shall result in an Evaluation Report, which shall be the basis for the Executive Board's decision-making. The higher education institution shall have the opportunity to comment on the Evaluation Report before the Executive Board takes its decision. [The evaluation reports and decisions](#) are published on the Agency's website. After delivering the decision, the institution has the right to object to the Agency, with such objections being considered by the Board of Appeal. The details of this process are governed by the Quality Assurance Act and are described in more detail in section 6.7.

Independence of formal outcomes

The supreme collective and autonomous governing and decision-making body of the Agency is the [Executive Board](#). The participation of stakeholders in the governance and other activities (decision-making) of the Agency follows the rule, that no stakeholder has a predominant role in the decision-making process. The members of the Executive Board are respected and recognized individuals and are not appointed as representatives of organizations but solely in their individual capacity. According to the law, a member of the Executive Board, a member of the Board of Appeal, an Auditor, and a member of a review panel shall act independently in the proceedings and shall not be bound by the instructions of the person who has proposed him or her to be appointed to the post. Therefore, an important aspect of the Agency's procedural processes and decisions is that they cannot be interfered with or influenced at any level by the Ministry or any other public authority. The final instance to which a higher education institution can turn in case of dissatisfaction, including with the outcome of an appeal procedure, is an independent court.

Standard 3.3 – Reflection

SAAHE is an independent and autonomous public legal entity. It has the full responsibility for its operations and the outcomes of those operations without any third-party influence.

The independence of Agency decision-making was already a key consideration in the development of the Quality Assurance Act. Organisational and operational independence is thus precisely determined by the act and other internal rules of the Agency. The organisational independence of the Agency is guaranteed by the diversity of the stakeholders involved in the nomination and selection of members of the bodies. The operational independence of the Agency is guaranteed by the full autonomy of the Agency in managing of its staff, in defining its own procedures and methodologies, and in the recruitment, nomination, and appointment of experts. Independence of formal outcomes is guaranteed by the setup, that no stakeholder has a predominant role in the decision-making process. The members of the Executive Board are respected and recognized individuals and are not appointed as representatives of organizations but solely in their individual capacity.

5.4 ESG standard 3.4 – Thematic analysis

Standard 3.4

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education systematically analyses higher education areas. It devotes attention and resources to producing regular thematic reports on its status and development. This obligation is also directly imposed on the Agency by § 4 (2) of the Quality Assurance Act.

In 2021, the Agency elaborated and published two thematic reports. The first is the thematic report [Quantitative Overviews of Demographic Development in the Slovak](#)

[Accreditation Agency for Higher Education for 1989-2020](#). It deals with basic quantitative overviews of demographic developments in Slovak higher education since 1989. Its aim was to bring together the available data and to display them graphically so that the interested reader can get a more comprehensive view of the trends of the above indicators and their connections.

The second thematic report elaborated and published in 2021 is [Changes in Higher Education as a Result of Implementation of Quality Assurance Systems 2019-2021](#). It maps the major changes in higher education that were initiated by the adoption of the Quality Assurance Act, the establishment of the Accreditation Agency, and its three-years' of operation. It provides an overview of events in the higher education area with links to the legislative framework of the Slovak Republic and to European standards, through information on the establishment of the accreditation agency, external quality assurance procedures, the proposal of accreditation standards, as well as an overview of the first qualitative and quantitative changes in the internal legislation of the higher education institutions themselves and in the offer of study programmes.

In order to obtain feedback from students, the Agency also underwent an across-the-board student satisfaction survey in 2021. It was aimed at mapping the satisfaction of students in Slovakia with their studies and student life. Partial results were provided to individual higher education institutions. In 2022 an overall overview and detailed results of the survey were published in the form of a complex and specific thematic report – [Summarizing Report on the Findings of the Student Satisfaction Survey](#) (in Slovak, main findings in English).

The second thematic analysis in 2022 – [Conclusions from the First Accreditations of Study Programmes](#). It focuses on the general findings and most frequent challenges of higher education institutions arising from the sixty-five proceedings conducted by the Agency based on the applications of higher education institutions for accreditation of study programmes, carried out in the period March 2021 - March 2022.

The Agency has a [Plan of Thematic Analysis and Reports for the Years 2022-2025](#), which has been approved by the Executive Board, and which ensures that this activity is regular and systematic. The plan specifies the topics that should be the subject of more detailed analysis, thematic reports drawing on the Agency's activities, in particular the analysis of evaluation reports, and examples of good practice encountered by the review panels of the Executive Board in their work.

Standard 3.4 – Reflection and challenges

SAAHE publishes reports that describe and analyse higher education in Slovakia and the general findings of their external quality assurance activities. The Agency has published the Plan of the thematic analysis for the next several years consisting of two thematic reports every year.

The obligation to elaborate thematic reports (analyses of the development of the higher education system) is directly imposed on the Agency by the Quality Assurance Act. The Agency pays high attention to this issue. It has developed a Plan of Thematic Analysis and Reports with the topics it wants to address, basically twice a year, so the regularity of this activity is ensured.

Room for improvement is perceived in the area of presentation of thematic reports and the communication of results to stakeholders and the wider public. This segment is one of the

Agency's weaknesses with potential for improvement. More focused work with the findings and a more convincing presentation of them could contribute to faster improvement of the quality of higher education and to the consolidation of the Agency's position and prestige.

5.5 ESG standard 3.5 - Resources

Standard 3.5

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

Human resources

The performance of the Agency's mandate and the full provision of its activities is dependent on the staffing of qualified personnel. The organisational structure, as well as the number of staff, is described in detail in section 4.2.

In the initial period, when the volume and diversity of the Agency's activities increased, there was a higher turnover of staff. In its new recruitment process, the Agency focused in particular on competencies, knowledge, and skills relevant to its specific activities. In 2021, the team has become significantly more professionalised, and the Agency has also successfully managed a large increase of activity in relation to study programme accreditations. However, new deadlines and the pandemic situation increased the workload and stress of some staff who managed their tasks professionally but could not be stabilised in the team. In the new staff selection process, the requirements were extended to those, that proved to be important, and had not been included in the original selection criteria. We are sure, that the high professional level of the team has been retained.

There are several reasons for the initial high turnover of the Agency's staff. The variety of activities and their unpredictability in terms of timing require the accumulation of tasks in a small team. In addition, new processes are constantly emerging which need to be covered by existing capacities. It is not always easy for employees to adapt to such a system. Last but not least, the financial possibilities of the Agency in the area of employee remuneration in the dynamic labour market in Bratislava are also a compounding factor.

In 2022, the Agency is preparing for requests from higher education institutions to assess the compliance of internal quality assurance systems with the standards, which implies an increased demand on the number of staff in the Accreditation Department, but also the provision of new processes in other departments. Such a request has been foreseen and the Agency has the mechanisms, budget, material, and space resources in place for this purpose.

The Agency's objective in the field of human resources for the next period is to stabilise, professionally develop and train its staff and remunerate them appropriately. In pursuing this objective, the Agency will draw on its experience from the past and on its financial capacities, using not only the state budget but also its own resources.

Material resources

The Agency is located in an administrative building at the Square Námestie slobody 11 in Bratislava, where it has rented office space and uses the entire 5th floor and 3rd floor. The

total leased area is 500 m². The Agency has 6 parking spaces available. The offices and meeting rooms are equipped with new office furniture, IT, and audio-visual equipment owned by the Agency. There are a total of 14 offices, 3 of which are used by the Agency's management (the Chair, Deputy Chair, and Head of Office) and 11 offices are available to employees.

The Agency also has three meeting rooms which are used for meetings of the Executive Board, the Board of Appeal, review panels, external visits, and training and working meetings. There is a reception area on the ground floor of the building, which is provided and operated by the landlord and serves all the companies based in the office building. The surrounding area of the Agency's headquarters has particularly good amenities and accessibility from all directions, as it is located almost in the centre of Bratislava and close to the main railway station.

The existing material provision currently appears to be sufficient to allow for the expected expansion and the Agency has no plans for changes in this area.

Agency's information system

The Agency is built from the start as paperless and fully digital. This requirement is also specified in the legislation, which imposes requirements for electronic filing of applications and electronic publication of public administration documents. All applications and communication with higher education institutions are done electronically. The Agency has its own information system covering all processes related to its core business. It has been built in a modular way according to the needs and required functionalities. Its great advantage is also the ability to work with data from the Ministry's registers. Higher education institutions upload their applications directly into the Agency's system, based on the created access. The entire agenda of the respective proceeding is thus fully electronic. Specific access to individual modules is granted to reviewers, administrators, members of the Executive Board, and other authorised persons. The Agency's modular and incremental information system is sometimes criticised by users (higher education institutions, reviewers, and members of the Executive Board), but mainly because of its lower user-friendliness. Changes and improvements to the software are costly. Nevertheless, the Agency plans to step up activity in this area.

For its own functioning, the Agency also uses an automated filing system and other software products that facilitate the recording and management of individual proceedings.

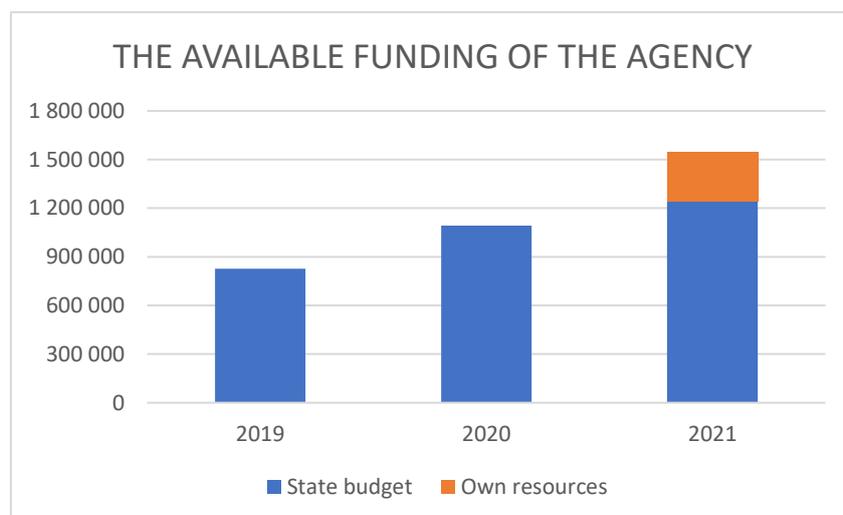
Financial resources

The method of financing the Agency is precisely defined in § 19 and § 20 of the Quality Assurance Act. The Agency manages public funds, has a clearly defined form of management, and has to comply with the Budget Rules Act, the Public Procurement Act, and other acts by which public organisations are bound. The Agency shall keep its funds in accounts with the State Treasury, with each source of revenue held in a separate account and accounting being executed in accordance with specific regulations. The Agency is managed during the year in accordance with a budget of revenue and expenditure drawn up and approved by the Executive Board for the calendar year in question.

Revenue structure of the Agency

In the first two years of its operation, the Agency had only funds from the state budget, which were allocated to the Agency by the Ministry of Education. This transfer is made annually based on the subsidy contract signed by the Chair of the Executive Board and the Minister of Education. As mentioned in section 5.3, the amount of funding for the Agency from the state budget for 2022 and the forecast for 2023 is static and is therefore decreasing in real terms. Another paradox is that the salaries of the members of the Agency's bodies and the mechanism of their valorisation (linked to the average wage in the Slovak economy) are directly determined by the Quality Assurance Act and the Agency's funding from the state budget does not reflect this. There is an advantage that the purpose of the funds is not detailed in the subsidy contract, and thus the Agency has relatively broad flexibility in budgeting. The exception is so-called 'labelled' funds, which are dedicated by the Ministry to cover (part of) the costs of a specific activity. In 2021, the Ministry thus allocated funds to the Agency to partially cover the [Survey on Student Satisfaction](#) project.

In 2021, the Agency also had funds available from fees for accreditation of study programmes, based on an approved fee schedule. This funding model was also foreseen in the Quality Assurance Act, which foresaw that the expenses for the activities of the review panels would be covered by the Agency's fees. This pillar of funding is expected to become more important in the coming years, thus strengthening the independence of the Agency.

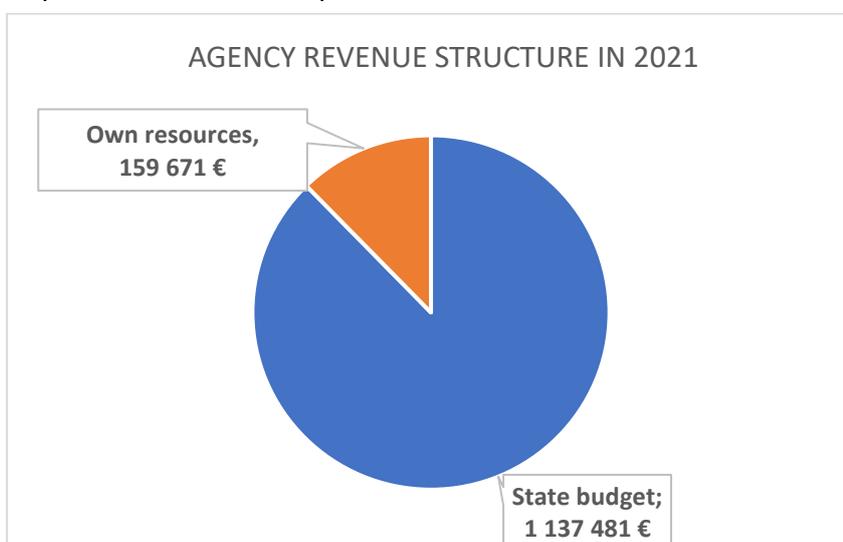


Agency financial planning and economics are also influenced by the specificities of the different types of funds available. In terms of accrual, the state budget funds are committed in the year they are granted, but there is a possibility of using them until March of the following year. The Agency makes use of this possibility, with the exception of 2019, in which, for objective reasons of the start-up of the Agency's individual activities, it was not possible to use the allocated funds. The Agency's financial year is thus financed by the current year's subsidy and the unrealised subsidy of the previous year. The Agency's own resources, collected from fees, are not subject to such a restriction and can be carried over to future years. However, in the case of these funds, the purpose for which they are used must be related to the expenditure of the proceedings for which they were collected. The common

feature of the state budget funds, and own resources is that they do not generate taxable profit.

The Quality Assurance Act also allows the Agency to carry out business activities and thus raise funds to support its activities. This business activity is limited by the act to the main subject of activity only, and for higher education institutions and companies based outside Slovakia, to avoid possible conflict of interest. This business activity has not been carried out by the Agency yet.

It is clear from the above that the funding of the Agency is substantially provided by the state budget. There is estimation of significant increase in direct financial resources from services for the year 2023. The Agency seeks to achieve continuity and sustainable management by strengthening its own revenue pillar and by prudent planning of expenditure in relation to expected activities and priorities.



Expenditure structure of the Agency

The structure of the Agency's expenditure is typical for organisations of a similar type. The main volume is made up of staff salaries and related operating expenditures. In the case of its own resources, the expenditure structure covers mainly the activities of the review panels. For 2021, a summary of the expenditure structure is given in the table below.

Expenditure structure of the Agency in 2021	State budget	Own resources
Total expenditure	1 137 481,46 €	159 671,51 €
<i>Wages, salaries, official revenue and other personal emoluments</i>	<i>659 353,05 €</i>	<i>12 850,00 €</i>
<i>Insurance premiums and contributions</i>	<i>240 914,17 €</i>	<i>4 491,08 €</i>
<i>Goods and services including</i>	<i>236 430,57 €</i>	<i>142 330,43 €</i>
Travel allowances	432,96 €	2 783,44 €
Energy, water, and communications	18 610,81 €	

Material	12 123,72 €	
Transport	0,00 €	
Routine and standard maintenance	0,00 €	
Rent	41 725,50 €	
Services including	163 537,58 €	139 546,99 €
<i>Non-staff remuneration</i>	46 205,30 €	117 274,00 €
<i>Other services</i>	117 332,28 €	22 267,39 €
<i>Fees</i>		5,60 €
Current transfers	783,67 €	

Agency's accounts and management

The Agency is required to draw up annual accounts of all revenue and expenditure and to submit a tax return. The Agency's auditor shall comment on the accounts. Each year, the Agency prepares a very detailed [Annual Activity and Economy Report](#), the essential part of which is a detailed statement of the use of funds, a factual evaluation of the use of funds, the settlement with the state budget, as well as the movements of the Agency's assets and other financial indicators.

Standard 3.5 – Reflection and challenges

SAAHE creates conditions and appropriate resources, both human and financial to execute its work and mission.

The Agency considers the human resources area to be a strength, despite the relatively higher staff fluctuation. However, systematic action in this area is still needed due to the necessary staffing reinforcement of the Accreditation Department. The challenge is precisely the low predictability of the capacity needed. Indeed, it is difficult to predict the timing of the Agency's receiving of requests from higher education institutions to assess the compliance of internal systems with the standards. The law requires that this will happen by the end of 2022 at the latest.

In the area of material provision, the challenge is to systematically improve the information system, which, despite its clear advantages, has been criticised for its poor user-friendliness.

In the area of financial independence, it should be noted that a substantial part of the Agency's budget is still provided by the state budget via the Ministry. The funding of the Agency in this area is therefore determined by the State Budget Act approved each year. This complicates long-term forecasting and financing larger scale projects (e.g., information system upgrade).

Although the Agency's budget itself is already solely a decision of the Executive Board, the principle of multi-source financing of the Agency, based to a greater extent on sources other than the state budget, will need to be further strengthened. The 2022 Quality Assurance Act modification allowed new fee schedule titles to be applied by the Agency in modifying the fee schedule.

5.6 ESG standard 3.6 – Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

Standard 3.6

Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

The Agency sees its responsibility to the public and other stakeholders as consistent with its own [mission](#) and [vision](#). In fulfilling them, it upholds the principles of independence, integrity and professionalism, transparency, cooperation and partnership, and continuous improvement. Following the mission and vision, the Agency has built three strategic areas of development I. accreditation activities, II. international cooperation and III. quality culture (described in the [Development Strategy of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education for the years 2022-2027](#)). The strategic objectives are elaborated into annual work plans and annually monitored. The strategy for 2022-2027 is elaborated to the Agency objectives and priorities for 2022 in the [Action Plan in the Form of Priorities for 2022 with a view to 2023](#) which was updated on 22 September 2022.

In fulfilling its mission and strategic objectives, the Agency establishes the policies, procedures of the internal system, and related responsibilities of the Executive Board, the Internal Quality Assurance Unit, and the Consultative Boards ([Internal Quality Assurance System of SAAHE](#)).

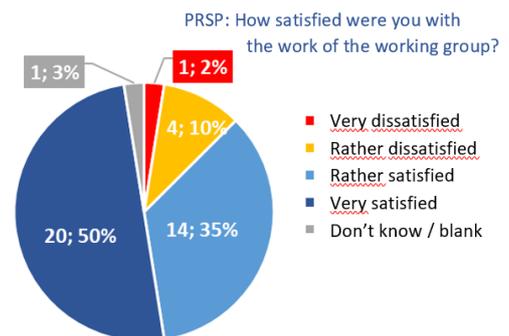
The policies and procedures of the SAAHE internal system guarantee:

1. The members of the bodies, reviewers, and staff of the Agency involved in the Agency's activities shall be competent and behave in a professional and ethical manner.
 - a. The Agency has established entry criteria of competence for inclusion in the list of reviewers (regulated in particular in the [Principles for registration in the list of reviewers and creation of review panels](#)). A reviewer may be registered in the review panel after training. At the same time, he/she will attend the preparatory meetings of the review panel prior to the evaluation (described in more detail in section 6.4).
 - b. The Agency shall avoid compromising the integrity of the evaluation due to conflicts of interest. As part of the creation of the review panel, the potential conflict of interest on the part of the reviewer and the higher education institution is examined (regulated in particular in the [Regulation of conflicts of interest of members of collective bodies, members of review panels of the Executive Board and employees of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education](#), and [the Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct of Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education](#)). Each reviewer shall provide the Agency with a declaration of no conflict of interest and a declaration of confidentiality and non-disclosure of information related to the evaluation (in the record of the Request for a Review Panel Member's Opinion) prior to registration in the review panel. The applicant (higher education institution) is informed in advance of the composition of the evaluation review panel and may submit a reasoned objection to the Executive Board on the grounds of bias against a member of the review panel (in the record of the Notification of the proposed composition of the review panel). This option has already been used by the higher education institution in six proceedings. In two proceedings, the Executive Board has assessed the objections

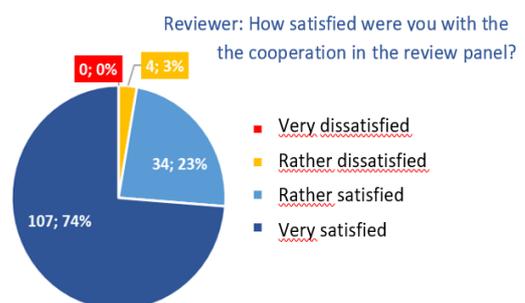
of bias against a member of the review panel as justified and replaced the review panel member.

2. The Agency shall have procedures for monitoring and evaluating the professionalism and integrity of the work of the review panel.
 - a. The assigned Agency staff member shall monitor the entire assessment process and the review panel's activities.
 - b. As part of the evaluation report process, a system of impartial reading is implemented before the report is sent to the higher education institution. This is completed by an assigned tutor who is usually experienced and impartial. Features of this process are monitored and evaluated with the aid of feedback questionnaires.

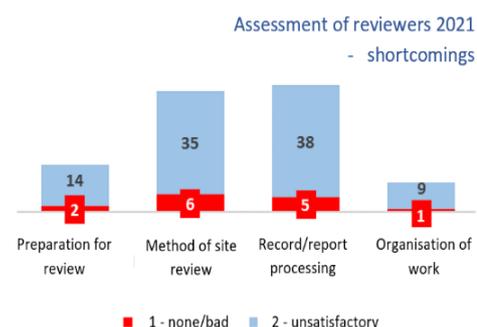
- c. Applicant representatives commented on the work of the review panel through a questionnaire survey and structured interviews. 14 structured interviews were carried out with representatives of the applicant management and a survey of persons responsible for the study programme (PRSP) was completed. The question was asked: "How satisfied were you with the work of the review panel?" The questionnaire was completed by 40 PRSP who applied for accreditation in 2021 as of April 1, 2022 (56% return rate), of which twenty were very satisfied with the work of the review panel. Among the reservations articulated in the open-ended questions were the expertise of the review panel member and the consistency of the evaluation, especially when assessing research, artistic and other activities.



- d. 145 reviewers (45% return rate) also commented on the work of the review panel as of 1 April 2022. 141 (95%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the cooperation in the review panel. The most frequently articulated shortcomings were the organisation of the work and the division of tasks of the members of the review panel, as well as reservations about the creation of the review panel.



- e. The results of the monitoring are also the basis for the reviewer's assessment. In 2022, 271 reviewer assessments were carried out, with the most frequently identified deficiencies related to the processing of assessment records and the organisation and method of site review.



Based on the results of the feedback and evaluation, the Agency has taken a number of measures. In 2022, measures have been approved in relation to the above findings, mainly in the areas of education and training of reviewers, creation of review panels, and modification of procedures for processing records and evaluation reports. The Agency is also working intensively on the acquisition of additional international reviewers in order to increase the impartiality of the assessments.

3. To maintain the integrity of the services provided, the Agency has further developed mechanisms for detecting, reporting, and handling shortcomings. Stakeholder representatives can:
 - a. File a complaint about deficiencies or protection of rights according to the [Slovak Higher Education Accreditation Agency's Directive on the Handling of Complaints](#). As of the date of the self-assessment, the Agency has not received any complaints about external quality assurance activities (described in more detail in section 6.7).
 - b. Submit notifications of anti-social activities according to the [Directive on the Internal System of Verification of Notifications of Anti-social Activities](#)). The Agency has not received any notifications of anti-social activity at the time of the self-assessment.
 - c. Lodge objections to the Agency's decisions. This possibility has been used by the higher education institutions in three proceedings so far. Objections submitted by a participant to the proceedings are reviewed by the [Board of Appeal](#), following the procedure according to the relevant provisions of the Quality Assurance Act and in accordance with the [Rules of Procedure of the Board of Appeal](#) (described in more detail in section 6.7)
4. The Agency has procedures in place to ensure protection against intolerance or discrimination of any kind (covered by paragraph 4 of the [Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct](#)). The procedures are applied in the creation of review panels as well as in the assessment procedures. At the time of the self-assessment, the Agency had not received any complaints of discriminatory behaviour or intolerance.
5. External quality assurance activities and documents produced by contractors are in accordance with the Agency's standards, methodology, and procedures. The Agency does not procure external assessment activities from other agencies or other external legal bodies. External assurance activities are carried out only by external reviewers, who are individuals rather than organisations. The reviewers carry out the assessment activities in their own name (not on behalf of another organisation), always based on a separate binding agreement (Terms of Reference) with a clear definition of the scope and content of the assessment. The condition for the involvement of a reviewer in the review panel is the agreement to comply with the Agency's internal rules and related generally binding regulations (as per Terms of Reference).
6. In accordance with § 4 of the Quality Assurance Act, the Agency communicates with the Ministry of Education mainly in the case of comments on the application for state approval, suggestions for modification of standards, proposals concerning higher education, information on facts raising suspicion of committing or participating in academic fraud (e.g. approval of standards, commenting on the methodology and fee schedule, proposals for modification of legislation, proposals on the management of the Ministry's registers, etc.).

The management of the internal system and the improvement of the Agency's activities are continuous in order to achieve optimum service delivery. The improvement system is carried out in short and long PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycles.

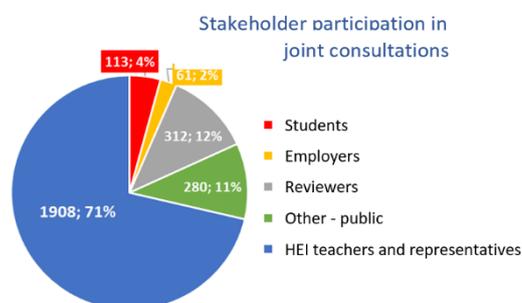
The short cycle is linked to the evaluation of the annual work plans and is based on the status and development of related indicators, the results of stakeholder feedback, and the internal review of the Agency's processes. In 2022, the input to the annual evaluation shall be the status of targets and indicators in the priority areas of the National Action Plan under the responsibility of SAAHE.

Internal and external feedback is part of the periodic evaluation of the internal system and the improvement of the Agency's services. In 2021/22, a survey was conducted to gauge the views of Agency staff, accreditation applicants, and participants at SAAHE events:

Type of findings/survey	Method
I. Feedback from the higher education institutions (applicants) for accreditation →	<i>Collection of opinions through structured interviews.</i>
II. Feedback from the persons responsible for the study programme →	<i>Questionnaire survey, automatic sending via the Information System (IS) of SAAHE to the persons responsible for study programme after the completion of the service.</i>
III. Feedback from members of the review panels →	<i>Questionnaire survey, automatic sending via IS SAAHE after completion of the review panels.</i>
IV. Feedback by the assigned SAAHE staff member on the work of the review panels →	<i>Staff opinion on the work of the review panel members after the completion of the assessment in the IS SAAHE.</i>
V. Event feedback →	<i>Online questionnaire survey after the completion of the assessment in the IS SAAHE.</i>

The feedback system and collection of stakeholder views are an integral part of the accreditation service delivery process. The possibility to express an opinion on the course of the service to representatives of the applicant, members of the review panel and authorised staff after its completion is sent independently by the IS SAAVS system (IS SAAHE, Feedback Module). Information on the outcome in accordance with the GDPR rules is immediately accessible to authorised persons, which allows, in addition to the adoption of systemic corrective measures, rapid response to the identified shortcomings. These outcomes are summarized in the document [Feedback evaluation and experiences with the accreditation activities of the Agency and proposals for their improvement](#), which has been approved at the Agency's Executive Board meeting on 25 August 2022.

Thematic consultations for all stakeholders are a valuable source of feedback on both internal quality assurance rules (SAAHE Standards) and external quality assurance (applications and assessment procedures). The Agency modifies the internal quality assurance rules according to the identified requirements (e.g. [Supplement to Standards 1](#)) and adds to the application guidelines (e.g. amendments to the standards evaluation methodology), updates the [FAQs](#), and adapts the Agency's programme of events.



The processes of transformation of both internal and external quality assurance of higher education in Slovakia are naturally under public and media scrutiny and accompanied by different expectations of participants in the higher education space. The Agency, in cooperation with partners, monitors and analyses public opinion on internal and external quality assurance activities in the media and on social networks. The Agency uses the information found in its external quality assurance, outreach activities (e.g., thematic consultations), and communication with stakeholders and the public through its website, social networks, and media.



The long cycle of development and improvement of the Agency's activities are linked to the regular self-assessment of the internal system, the evaluation of the Agency's development strategy, and the results of the external assessment of the Agency's internal system. The Agency is currently undergoing the first self-evaluation.

Standard 3.6 – Reflection and challenges

Since its inception, the Agency has been developing and improving internal quality assurance processes based on the results of internal and external stakeholder feedback and internal process reviews with a view to providing optimal external quality assurance services. A fundamental precondition is to enhance the professionalism and integrity of all activities carried out. It establishes a feedback system for external quality assurance services.

The novelty of the procedures requires the Agency to focus on monitoring and reviewing the functionality and effectiveness of the internal quality assurance procedures in the next period. Key challenges include better linking the results of the monitoring of the work of the review panels to measures to improve the integrity and professionalism of the assessment (in particular the preparation of a comprehensive programme for the professionalisation of both external and internal quality assurance). Further, the effectiveness of the feedback system needs to be improved. Adoption of feedback procedures to new external quality assurance services in line with the service implementation plan and further automation of the monitoring system for the assessment and evaluation processes of key indicators are also part of the improvement area mentioned above.

5.7 ESG standard 3.7 – Cyclical external review of agencies

Standard 3.7

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education was established by the Quality Assurance Act in 2018 and has completed its first three years of operation. The Act obliges it to apply for membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education ENQA and registration in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education EQAR in 2022. The Agency's activities and operations to date create the preconditions for the fulfilment of such ambition and its successful completion.

The fulfilment of the Agency's strategy for sustainable membership of ENQA is anchored directly in the Quality Assurance Act, which (in § 4 (3)) obliges the Agency to request an assessment of its activities by ENQA at least once every five years. This obligation is also explicitly reflected in the fundamental internal regulation of the Agency, which is the [Internal](#)

[Quality Assurance System of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education](#). It also imposes the obligation of an external evaluation of the Agency's internal system and its activities once every 5 years.

6. DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AGENCY'S EQA ACTIVITIES (COMPLIANCE WITH PART 2 OF THE ESG)

6.1 ESG standard 2.1 – Consideration of internal quality assurance

Standard 2.1

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance described in Part 1 of the ESG.

The Quality Assurance Act provides a legal framework for the external quality assurance. It has established the Agency that is fully equipped with the necessary legal power to act as an authority within the framework of the ESG 2015. One of the key Agency competences is to issue the Standards for Internal Quality Assurance System and Standards for Study Programmes as the requirements for formal decision. Both these instruments correspond to ESG part I. The external assurance procedures defined by both the Quality Assurance Act and the Methodology for Evaluation of the Standards, are focused on evaluation of the compliance of the internal QA system of the HEI with the Standards and its implementation.

Following the Quality Assurance Act and cooperation with stakeholders, the Agency develops, monitors, and updates the rules of quality assurance of higher education in Slovakia in the entire scope of ESG 2015. In this endeavour, and within the limits of legislative regulations, it links internal and external quality assurance rules and ensures their compliance with ESG 2015 (Table 6.1).

The Agency's utmost goal is to ensure full compliance of the internal systems of Slovak higher education institutions and their implementation with the quality assurance rules of the European Higher Education Area ([EHEA](#)). Demonstrating compliance with ESG will improve transparency, mutual trust, and recognition of educational achievements, study programmes, and other services provided internationally. Another important objective of the transformation of internal and external quality assurance systems in line with ESG is to increase the flexibility of Slovak higher education and the transition from accreditation of study programmes to institutional accreditation of higher education institutions, with the gradual granting of the right to independently develop and modify study programmes in individual fields of study. The accreditation of study programmes by the Agency will continue to have a place in the system as a tool for a higher education institution to enter a new field of study or new level.

Table 6.1 Compliance of SAAHE standards with ESG 2015.

<i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance ESG, part 1.</i>	<i>Standards for the Higher Education Internal Quality Assurance system (set out the requirements for the policies, procedures, and structure of the higher education institution's internal system)</i>	<i>Standards for Study Programmes (Set out the requirements for the study programme).</i>
1.1 Quality assurance policy	Article 2 Quality assurance policies	
1.2 Design and approval of programmes	Article 3 Design, modification, and approval of study programmes	Article 2 Proposal and modifications of study programme Article 3 Approval of study programme
1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching, and assessment	Article 4 Student-centred learning, teaching, and assessment	Article 4 Student-centred learning, teaching, and assessment
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition, and certification	Article 5 Student admission, progression, recognition, and awarding of academic degrees	Article 5 Student admission, progression, recognition, and awarding of academic degrees
1.5 Teaching staff	Article 6 Teaching staff	Article 6 Teaching staff Article 7 Research, artistic and other activities of higher education institutions
1.6 Learning resources and student support	Article 7 Learning resources and student support	Article 8 Learning resources and student support
1.7 Information management	Article 8 Information management	Article 9 Information management on the study programme
1.8 Public information	Article 9 Public information	Article 10 Public information on the study programme
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	Article 10 On-going monitoring and periodic review and approval of study programmes	Article 11 On-going monitoring and periodic review and approval of study programmes
1.10 Periodic external quality assurance	Article 11 Periodic external quality assurance	

Following the Quality Assurance Act, the Agency has established national **standards for internal quality assurance** systems in higher education institutions and the study programmes in its documents [Standards for the Internal Quality Assurance System](#) and [Standards for Study Programme](#).

The Standards for Study Programme are a set of requirements, the fulfilment of which is conditional upon the granting of accreditation of a study programme

Standards for the Internal Quality Assurance System mean a set of requirements for the internal system and the way of its implementation in the higher education area. They set out the requirements for the policies, structures, and processes of the higher education institution's internal system. At the same time, they require the study programme to comply with the Standards for Study Programme. A key requirement of the standards is the *'acceptance of the primary responsibility of the higher education institution for the quality of the education provided at all parts of the higher education institution'* (Article 2(1) of the Standards for the Internal System).

Regarding the state approval proceedings, the same Standards for the Internal System and the Standards for Study Programme are applied. Thus, the Agency implements its processes of assessment of the proposed internal system compliance with the Standards for

the Internal System and assesses the proposed study programmes according to the procedures for the accreditation of study programmes.

Following the standards and the Quality Assurance Act, the Agency has developed and is updating **the external quality assurance** rules according to Part 2 of the ESG in the [Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards](#). The methodology contains procedures, criteria, and indicators for external quality assurance.

A common framework for both internal and external quality assurance is the structure of requirements (standards). Both the self-assessment report, which is prepared by the higher education institution, and the assessment report of the review panels are drawn up according to it. The common structure (standards, accreditation criteria, self-assessment, and evaluation) enables clarity and transparency in demonstrating compliance throughout the quality assurance system.

The Agency examines the effectiveness of the implementation of the internal system processes and optimises the external quality assurance rules (e.g., it has modified the Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards two times - [Amendments to the methodology for the evaluation of standards dated 18 February 2021](#), modified the requirements for the application documents for the accreditation of study programmes and the recommended procedures for their processing; the second modification of the [Methodology for the evaluation of standards](#) is effective from 22 September 2022).

Standard 2.1. – Reflection and challenges

The external quality assurance processes in Slovakia are designed by both the Quality Assurance Act as well as the Agency documentation to address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance as described in Part 1 of the ESG.

The Agency reflected the requirements of the internal quality assurance as defined in ESG pt. 1 into the standards for internal systems for HEIs. The ESG standards for external quality assurance (pt. 2) are mainly fixed in the Quality Assurance Act and further suited in the Agency documentation, mainly in the Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards, and are focused to evaluate the internal systems of HEIs. Quality assurance, according to the standards for the internal system, is based on the acceptance of the primary responsibility of the higher education institutions for the quality of their study programmes and other activities.

The processes of gradual transformation of both internal and external quality assurance bring the need for further optimisation and amendment of the rules. The Agency will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the implementation of the internal quality assurance rules (standards) in the higher education institution area and continuously optimise the internal and external quality assurance rules concerning the status and needs for further improvement of the internal systems of higher education institutions.

The results of completed assessments and the results of related feedback are an essential source of information for the optimisation of both internal and external quality assurance rules. The aim is to increase the effectiveness and reliability of external quality assurance.

It might also be necessary to revise both standards and methodology in the light of changes in legislation (e.g., for teacher training programmes).

Equally important is the active participation of the Agency in the development of common principles and rules for quality assurance in higher education at the EHEA and ENQA level.

6.2 ESG standard 2.2 - Designing methodologies fit for purpose

Standard 2.2

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

The basic framework for external quality assurance is defined by the Quality Assurance Act in line with the ESG principles, which gives an efficient legal basis. The Agency was empowered by this law to design, publicly consult, approve, and publish the accreditation standards and the methodology for their evaluation. This gives good coherence between external quality assurance framework design and the relevant regulations and helps to effectively achieve its aims and objectives.

The Agency has elaborated and updates the [Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards](#) (hereinafter Methodology). The Methodology is a set of **procedures, criteria, and indicators** through which the Agency's Executive Board review panels and the Agency's staff evaluate the fulfilment of each standard and any associated corrective actions.

The Agency is progressively establishing an external quality assurance system favouring electronic sharing and processing of information between the Agency, the applicant, and the review panel. The reason is to reduce the workload associated with both external and internal quality assurance processes. At the same time, it has consistently emphasized the need to computerize internal systems of higher education institutions and reduce the associated administrative workload.

Procedures for the evaluation – common work procedures for review panels.

The evaluation of an application is generally carried out in four steps (stages):

- I. Evaluation of the application documentation and preparation for the review
The review panel begins its work by examining the application documentation, in particular the self-assessment report, publicly available information related to the subject of the evaluation, and, in cooperation with the Agency staff, information from the Ministry's registers. This includes preparatory meetings between the members of review panel and Agency staff.
The institution's **self-assessment report** reflects the institution's progress in meeting each standard, evidence, and follow-up activities resulting from the most recent evaluation. The self-assessment is based on evidence of improvement in each standard (e.g., [Guide for Developing an Internal Assessment Report on Higher Education Institution Implementation of Internal Systems](#) - in Slovak).
- II. On-site review of the higher education institution and consultation with stakeholders
Following the findings of the first stage, the review panel, in cooperation with the Agency staff and representatives of the institution, will elaborate an on-site review plan. The preparation of the plan shall include a meeting between selected members of the review panel, Agency staff and representatives of the institution.
The on-site review shall comprise:
 - an opening meeting,
 - collecting and analysing information and evidence,
 - a summary of findings,
 - a final meeting with representatives of the institution.

During the evaluation, verification of the application information and evidence, interviews with stakeholders of the subject of the application take place (site management, responsible persons, teachers, students, employer representatives, support staff, graduates and partners of the applicant following the on-site review plan) and inspection of the premises according to the subject of the evaluation takes place.

III. Elaboration of the Evaluation Report

After the completion of the on-site review, the members of the review panel shall summarise the findings of the report elements and elaborate the Evaluation Report. The report aims to provide the institution with clear information on the process and outcome of the evaluation sufficient for both follow-up and further improvement. In the report, the review panel shall also provide an evaluation of the level of compliance of the individual standards, the deficiencies identified, and recommendations for the proceeding's party. The Agency sends the Evaluation Report to the institution for comments before submitting it to the Executive Board for decision. The institution may comment on the content and conclusions of the Evaluation Report.

IV. Decision on the application

The Agency's Executive Board shall decide on the outcome of the application based on both the Evaluation Report and the opinion of the institution at its meeting ([Rules of Procedure of the Executive Board](#)). Decisions of the Executive Board are published on the Agency's website - [Decisions](#).

In the case of consideration of corrective actions (e.g., consideration of reports on the outcome of the actions taken), the second stage of on-site review takes place if the type of corrective action requires it.

Criteria for the evaluation of standards - the Agency has established in the methodology a set of criteria for the evaluation of standards for the internal system, the evaluation of standards for the study programme. A criterion is a specific requirement of a standard or a partial aspect of a standard. The results of the review of related criteria are the basis for the evaluation of the fulfilment of the respective standard.

To ensure consistency in the evaluation of Article 7 of the Standards for the Study Programme, the Agency provides guidelines for the members of the review panels and the higher education institutions on the evaluation of the research, artistic, and other activities of teachers in Part V of the Methodology. The Agency's aim in this area has been to move from a purely quantitative evaluation to a holistic expert evaluation of the sufficiency of the level of research, artistic, and other activity of teachers providing the study programme at the relevant level of education.

Indicators for the evaluation of standards – the methodology offers a set of indicators that higher education institutions and review panels use to monitor the development and improvement of particular aspects of the internal system or study programme.

The preparation of the methodology was conducted in parallel with the preparation of the accreditation standards. The primary objectives were the suitability of the procedures for

verifying compliance with the standards and related regulations, the adequacy of the workload, and the motivation of the applicant to improve further.

The Agency worked with representatives of all stakeholders in the development of the standards. Since the beginning of May 2020, intensive individual and group consultations with experienced domestic and international reviewers and other experts in external quality assurance of higher education have been initiated. On 14 July 2020, the Agency announced on its website the launch of consultations on the preparation of the methodology with external stakeholders and the professional public. Subsequently, a number of consultations were held with representatives of higher education institutions and other stakeholders, namely the Student Council for Higher Education, the Federation of Employers' Associations of the Slovak Republic, the Republican Union of Employers, the Council of Higher Education Institutions, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Alliance of Sector Councils and the Higher Education Section of the Ministry of Education. Based on the evaluation of these discussions, a final methodology proposal was drawn up and approved at the meeting of the Agency's Executive Board on 17 September 2020.

In order to increase the efficiency and objectivity of external quality assurance, SAAHE updates the methodology on a regular basis. It adapts the evaluation procedures and criteria to the needs of the review stakeholders, increasing the efficiency of the procedures and reducing the workload.

In early 2021, the Agency decided to supplement the methodology to unify the conditions for staff at higher education institutions and research institutions (external education institutions) concerning the supervision of dissertations and to clarify the interpretation of the conditions for meeting the qualifications for filling posts. Another change was made by the Agency to give higher education institutions more flexibility in nominating persons providing profile courses for the evaluation of the level of research, artistic and other activity (Amendment to the Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards, 18 February 2021).

The latest modification of the methodology and related guidelines was approved on 22 September 2022 in connection with the measures resulting from the periodic evaluation of the internal system, based on the feedback evaluation described in section 5.6, and due to the compliance with some modified evaluation criteria and procedures brought about by the amendment to the Higher Education Act.

Standard 2.2 – Reflection and challenges

The Agency has established an elaborated external quality assurance system and rules. The basic design of the external quality assurance (ESG pt. 2) is mainly fixed in the Quality Assurance Act and further designed in the Agency documentation, mainly in the Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards. All key regulation, including the Act, the Standards, and the Methodology, was prepared with the involvement of the stakeholders.

They are continuously improved and adapted in cooperation with stakeholders, reflecting their expectations and changes in legislation. The methodology is compiled and further optimised, taking into account the level of workload and costs that are imposed on higher education institutions. The Agency is continuously improving the evaluation system, increasing the level of automation of external quality assurance data processing.

The methodology supports higher education institutions in improving quality and enables them to demonstrate their improvement. Evaluation reports and outputs provide clear information to both applicants and the public on evaluation results and follow-up.

The results of monitoring and feedback, as well as changes in legislation, have brought the need for further optimisation and development of the evaluation procedures (methodology). Key areas for optimisation of the methodology include increasing the efficiency of the application and processing, the work of the review panel, the processing of the evaluation report, the adaptation of the evaluation system to international reviewers, the optimisation of the evaluation of research, artistic and other activities, and other aspects in line with the results of the review of the system.

Also, the amendment of the Higher Education Act in April 2022 has triggered the need for further updating the methodology, e.g., in the field of accreditation of teacher training programmes, verification of fulfilment of the conditions for the award of a degree, review of academic fraud.

Key challenges in the next period include the implementation and validation of the methodology of other external quality assurance services, specifically in the evaluation of internal systems, verification of corrective actions and supervision, evaluation in connection with the application for state approval, evaluation of joint study programmes, etc. The Agency wishes to further emphasise the need for a public debate on the inclusion of micro-credentials in the education system.

6.3 ESG standard 2.3 – Implementing processes

Standard 2.3

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include

- a self-assessment or equivalent;
- an external assessment normally including a site visit;
- a report resulting from the external assessment;
- a consistent follow-up.

All regulations, acts, and decrees governing the Agency's activities related to external quality assurance processes are published on the Agency's website. These include, in particular, [the Quality Assurance Act](#), [the Higher Education Act](#), [the ESG Standards](#), [the Standards for the Internal System](#), [the Standards for Study Programme](#), [the Standards for the Habilitation Proceedings and Inauguration Proceedings](#) and [the Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards](#). These regulations are supplemented by explanatory guides and guidelines for higher education institutions and external reviewers (section 6.6), which help to ensure consistency and a professional approach.

The application process is fully automated, taking place in the Agency's IT system, and is carried out in the following stages:

Self-assessment or equivalent

The higher education institution submits the application for accreditation of a new study programme independently using the form in the Agency's information system via the Application module. The information system provides instructions on how to complete the application. The application form contains basic information about the institution, the study programme and the persons providing the study programme. Once the data is entered by the institution, the system generates the text of the application, which is also submitted by the institution via the e-repository, complete with the electronic signature of the statutory body. The institution will then be sent a request to pay the fee which the institution pays to the Agency for the application. The Agency's proceeding shall start on the day of receiving the complete application to the Agency, including the payment of the fee.

Subsequently, the application is processed in the Applications module. Here, the related applications are grouped into a proceeding which is assigned a separate file number and each SP (study programme) has its own entry created in that proceeding. At the end a separate Agency decision will be issued for that proceeding. The created proceeding is also assigned to a staff member of the Accreditation Department who ensures and coordinates the procedural actions in that proceeding. The proceeding ready for further work is in the 'Started' status and has a 'Review Panel' item created in addition to the Application Items. The 'Review Panel' item groups together all members of the review panel, who are able to edit their basic data in the system and download the mandatory contracts for the proceedings. After signing the contracts, they get an access to the documentation of the proceedings.

The application is accompanied by a description of the study programme, the Self-Assessment Report and other documentation necessary for the evaluation of the application (course information sheets, study programme, etc.). The key communication tool of the institution towards the reviewers and the public is the Internal assessment report of the study programme. Its role is to provide sufficient assurance to the Agency's Executive Board review panel that the institution's internal policies ensure that the standards for the study programme are met and also that the institution is complying with the policies. As part of the internal assessment report, the institutions self-assess the fulfilment of each of the standards for the study programme and provide evidence of this compliance (references to them).

In the Self-Assessment of compliance section, the institution shall briefly describe the policies and procedures for meeting the relevant standard or refer to specific provisions of existing regulation, procedure, record(s), information system, contract, etc., that it has implemented in meeting the standard. The institution briefly assesses the outcome and extent of compliance with the standard and intentions to ensure compliance in the relevant area in the implementation of the study programme. In the References to evidence section, the institution provides a list of evidence (related internal regulations, internal records, parts of the study programme description, information sheets, scientific/artistic/teacher profile, place in the information system, place on the website, student records, etc.) that can be used to demonstrate compliance with the standard, including an electronic link to the evidence. If the evidence cannot be accessed remotely by the review panel, it shall be presented during the site visit. For applications at the third level of higher education, the institution shall also include annexes in English.

External evaluation

The external evaluation of the institution's application by the Agency's review panel includes the examination of the application documentation submitted by the institution, a site visit, and the elaboration of the Evaluation Report of the review panel.

In evaluating the supporting documentation, the members of the review panel shall base their evaluation on the internal assessment report of the institution, the description of the study programme, and other annexes submitted by the institution. All these materials are available in the information system under the heading created for each member of the review panel for the proceeding. The documentation can be downloaded by the members of the review panel and worked with offline. They can write their comments and questions on the submitted materials in a common entry shared by the whole review panel. If necessary, they can request additional materials, which the institution will either send in advance to the members of the review panel or submit for inspection during the site visit. Based on the materials reviewed, the review panel will assess the strengths and weaknesses of the institution and select areas that require further clarification during the site visit.

Prior to the institution visit, meetings are held between the review panel and the coordinators of the proceeding - Agency staff - to discuss the results of the review of the submitted materials and to agree on the conduct of the site visit. During these meetings it is also discussed the possible necessity to request additional materials to sufficiently assess the application. Subsequently, a meeting will be held between the chair of the review panel and representatives of the institution and the Agency to fine-tune the schedule, agenda and content of the site visit and to discuss any uncertainties. Due to the pandemic situation, these meetings have so far all taken place online. The agreed review plan containing the exact time schedule of the visit, the names of the representatives of the institution and the review panel participating in each part of the site visit, indicating the mode of the visit (online, in person, hybrid), shall be entered into the information system and sent to the institution and the members of the review panel.

Site visit

Site visits are generally carried out in person at the institution; due to the pandemic situation, some were carried out in a hybrid or online format. The site visit includes meetings with representatives of the stakeholders - students, professional experts, representatives of the proposed study programme and the study programme approving body, as well as with the institution's management and those responsible for study programme implementation. Site visits to assess an application for accreditation of a study programme last between 1.5 days and two days. The visit is followed by a meeting of the members of the review panel to discuss the main findings and conclusions of the site visit. This meeting is followed by a meeting with the institution's management, where the chair of the review panel presents the key findings of the review panel to the institution, without evaluating them.

Evaluation report of the review panel

Based on a review of the documentation from the institution and a site visit, the review panel will elaborate an Evaluation Report (section 6.6). A preliminary draft of the Evaluation Report shall be uploaded by the chair of the review panel into the information system for comments by the members of the review panel. Once it has been approved and voted on by the members of the review panel, the Evaluation Report is sent to the institution for comments. The Evaluation Report, together with the institution's comments, shall be the subject of a decision by the Executive Board.

Decision-making process

At the next stage of the process, the Executive Board decides whether or not to grant accreditation to the study programme. The decision is sent to the institution, entered in the register of study programmes, and in the Agency's information system. It is then added to the other published documents from the proceeding (institution documentation, internal assessment report, review panel evaluation report) and published on the Agency's website.

After the completion of the accreditation process of the study programme, a survey using questionnaires or structured interviews is carried out with the reviewers, the coordinators of the accreditation process, the persons responsible for the study programme, and the persons responsible for the quality system at the institution to evaluate the effectiveness of the whole process from different perspectives and to identify areas for possible improvement.

Monitoring – consistent implementation of follow-up actions

The recommendations of the review panel from the evaluation reports are recorded and subsequently will be used as one of the bases for monitoring the compliance of the implementation of the study programme with the submitted application for accreditation of the study programme and with the Standards for Study Programme. According to the Quality Assurance Act the Agency has the right and duty to continuously monitor the above-mentioned compliance and assess the compliance after two years of the first graduate of the respective accredited study programme and no sooner than after its standard duration.

Implementing processes – Internal system evaluation

The above-described stages (monitoring has not yet been done) that have been consistently pursued in all programme accreditations will also be included in the institutional accreditations, and also consistently implemented in the state approval proceedings. The process of assessment of internal system and its implementation, that according to the Quality Assurance Act is obligatory for all HEIs in Slovakia, has already begun with the submission of the information of HEIs that they are in compliance with the Standards for internal systems and with the Quality Assurance Act. All of the 33 HEIs have submitted this statement to the Agency. Subsequently, they have to submit their application for assessment of their internal system no later than 31 December 2022.

The Agency's preparatory process is underway with a prepared form for applications. The possibility to submit an application is already open in the Agency's information system

and some of the HEIs have already started to prepare their applications. A guide for the preparation of the self-assessment report is also available on the Agency's website. A similar procedure to the one for the study programme accreditation will follow.

The list of reviewers is being checked and new reviewers from insufficiently covered study fields and missing types of reviewers (students, employers) are added. The review panels will evaluate the applications based on the materials submitted by the HEIs including the self-assessment report and the site visit.

The review panels are expected to be much bigger than during the programme accreditations since the law demands besides the decision about the compliance of the internal system also the decision about the compliance of its implementation in each study field and level at the particular HEI. The Evaluation Report will be elaborated by the review panel and before its finalisation submitted to the HEI for factual inspection. The whole review panel will vote on the Evaluation Report which then will be sent to the HEI for its comments.

The Executive Board will make its decision based on the Evaluation Report of the review panel and HEI's comments on it. If the resolution of the Executive Board is that the system and its implementation is in compliance with the Standards for the internal system and the Act, the decision will also include all the study fields and levels in which the institution is authorized to establish, implement, and modify its study programmes. If the internal system or its implementation is not in compliance with the Standards, the Agency is entitled to impose corrective measures in its decision.

Standard 2.3 - Reflection and challenges

External quality assurance processes provided by SAAHE are pre-defined, published and correspondingly implemented. They include a self-assessment report, an external assessment by review panels generally comprising a site visit, an evaluation report of the review panel, and a subsequent monitoring process.

SAAHE has so far conducted ESG reviews for accreditation of new study programmes. It is currently using the knowledge from these proceedings to set up and improve the processes for evaluating the compliance of institutions' internal systems and their implementation with the Standards for the Internal System. More tailored training of review panel members in the formulation of justifications and statements in evaluation reports will lead to easier drafting of Executive Board decisions. Various specific training sessions are planned for different types of reviewers (students, professional experts, review panel chairs, and experts in the field of study).

By law, a proceeding's party has the right to comment on the evaluation report. In order to avoid possible ambiguities and errors in the final version of the evaluation report, the possibility of submitting the evaluation report to the institution for review before it is submitted to the Executive Board is being considered.

6.4 ESG standard 2.4 – Peer-review experts

Standard 2.4

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

Based on its mission and strategic goals, SAAHE recognizes that the role of external reviewers is essential to achieving the ultimate goals and practices related to external quality assurance in higher education. All SAAHE external quality assurance processes are carried out with the participation of external experts, including national and international academic experts, employers, and student representatives. SAAHE involves students in accreditation processes and decision-making. During programme accreditation, generally five experts are engaged. The number of experts engaged in institutional accreditation would be dependent on the respective HEI size and structure regarding mainly to the number of faculties (schools), study fields and study programmes provided. We expect up to 30 experts engaged in the largest HEIs. As for the state approval proceedings the above-mentioned approaches would be combined.

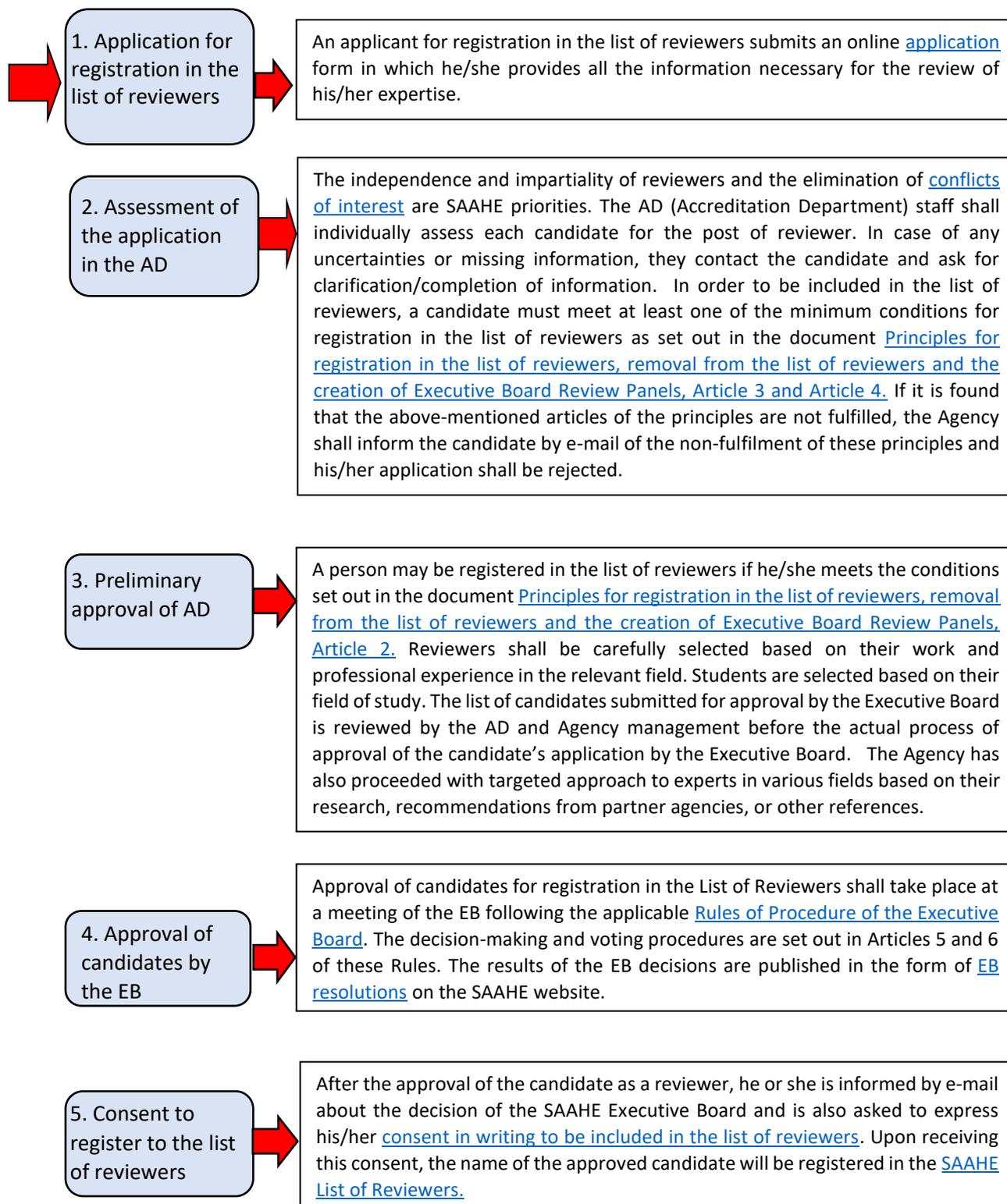
The early years of the Agency were characterised by an extensive approach to establishing a sufficiently large list of reviewers. This approach ensured the quantity of the list but did not consider the quality of having covered a suitable range of fields and the reviewer's identification with the role of the auditor. Following the experience with the accreditation of study programmes, the Agency has significantly changed its approach to the development and updating of the list of reviewers. In addition to the open calls that characterised the early days of the Agency, there has been a move to replenish the list through targeted outreach to ensure that all necessary fields are covered and that there is a much-reduced risk of not having a suitable reviewer. The Agency's procedures have been adapted to allow for dynamic additions to the list of reviewers based on expected future proceedings.

The Agency, from the very moment of an expert registration, provides support and training and briefing by the staff members of the Accreditation Department (AD). Details of this process of trainings carried out within the accreditation of new study programs in 2021 are summarized in point 6 of the subsequent flow chart.

For the assessment of internal systems, a plan of briefings and training is set as follows. The first training is dedicated to the understanding of goals, procedures, stages, and necessary outcomes of the assessment process. This training is based on the fact that the experts are already familiar with the legislative framework of the quality assurance processes (ESG, Slovak Standards, Acts and Methodology). The second training is role oriented. Its goal is to prepare experts for their specific role in the review panel – academics, employers, experts on internal systems, international experts, and students. When the experts are appointed to a review panel part of the online meeting before the site visit will be dedicated to a training for their specific role on the visit and the elaboration of the Evaluation Report with consequent reasoning. All these trainings include (will include) case studies for better understanding of the topics.

Currently, there are 1,522 persons on the SAAHE list of reviewers. Of this number, 411 are international reviewers, 312 are professional experts, 115 are students, and 78 are reviewers qualified to assess the internal system of higher education institutions. In the

proceedings to date (all types), 104 international reviewers, 53 professional experts, and 58 students have been involved. In the following steps, the 'life cycle' of a SAAHE reviewer is characterised.



6. Training
process

Once a candidate has been registered in the list of reviewers, an e-mail is sent to him/her requesting initial training. The training process consists of three basic modules. The [initial training process](#) is carried out using materials available on the Agency's website. The following module is 'Standards'. Reviewers will receive an overview of the SAAHE and ESG standards. This information is also published on the Agency's website. Completion of this online training is mandatory, and confirmation of this procedure is provided by completing the feedback form. Only after this information (training) module, can a reviewer be assigned to a review panel. The third information module is the training of the reviewer regarding the work with the SAAHE IS. Further training of reviewers is carried out gradually according to individual topics, reviewers' tasks, and possible changes in legislation. To develop the expert competencies of reviewers, the Agency organises information webinars. Once a reviewer has been approved as a member of the review panel, during the online meetings the reviewers are trained to work with the information system. Additionally, they are familiarised with the individual steps of the review process and the procedure for elaborating the evaluation report.

7. Preparation
and submission
of a proposal
of the Review
Panel
composition

The Agency's Review Panel (RP) is proposed and formed based on the Procedure for the Creation of RPs as set out in Article 8 of the [Principles for registration in the list of reviewers, removal from the list of reviewers and the creation of Executive Board Review Panels](#). When proposing the composition of the review panel, known facts concerning potential conflicts of interest of members of the proposed review panel as well as the type of proceedings and the specifics of the standards to the fields of study and study programmes, shall be considered. In the case of an application for institutional accreditation of a higher education institution or an extraordinary review of the internal quality system of a higher education institution initiated by the Agency, the review panel shall be designed to include, in particular, reviewers who are experts in the internal quality system and experts in the fields of study in which the applicant is pursuing programmes of study. In the case of an application for accreditation of a doctoral programme, a review panel shall be proposed in such a way that it is composed of a majority of experts in the field of study in which the programme is to be carried out and at least one of whom shall be an international reviewer. At least one student shall be appointed to each review panel by the Chair of the Executive Board. At least one member of the RP shall be a professional expert.

8. Approval of
the composition
of RP by EB

The approval of the composition of the RP shall take place at the EB meeting following the applicable [Rules of Procedure](#). The proposal for the composition of the RP may be approved by the EB at the meeting or outside the meeting by a per rollam voting. The decision-making and voting procedures are set out in Articles 5 and 6 of these Rules. The results of the EB's decision on the composition of the RP shall be published in the form of EB [resolution](#) on the Agency's website.

9. Obtaining the reviewer's consent to the appointment to the RP and communicating the composition of RP to the HEI



Based on the resolution of the SAAHE Executive Board, an e-mail is sent to the members of the RP with a request for the reviewer's consent to be included in the RP and also with a request for a statement that he/she is not in conflict of interest with the proceeding's party. Moreover, an attachment to the e-mail with a brief term of reference of the review panel containing the subject matter of the evaluation is also sent. Once the reviewer has agreed that there is no conflict of interest, the notification of the composition of the RP is sent to the proceeding's party. The proceeding's party may submit to the Agency a justified objection of bias against a member of the panel. The objection of bias must be raised in writing within five working days of the date on which the composition of the review panel was notified to the institution. If a member of the RP disagrees with the inclusion in the RP, the process shall be repeated from step 7. If the participant expresses an appeal, his/her appeal is presented at the EB meeting and the EB decides whether or not to accept the appeal. If the EB decides to accept the objection, the process is repeated from step 7. If the objection is rejected by the EB, the next steps continue, and an explanation is sent to the appellant.

10. Start of RP work



A mandatory contract is signed with the respective member of the RP. After its signature and subsequent [publication](#) in the Central Register of Contracts, the members of the RP are automatically provided with access rights to the SAAHE IS. Subsequently, the members of the RP can familiarize themselves with the documents of the participant's application. Simultaneously, the administrator of the respective proceeding contacts the members of the RP with the request to set a date for an online meeting between the members of the RP and the representatives of the Agency. The main focus of this meeting is the clarification and specification of the roles of the individual members of the RP and the development of the site visit plan. Moreover, training will be provided during the online meeting, regarding the work with the SAAHE IS. Specifics and/or other regulations applicable to the relevant proceeding are also covered.

To determine the level of satisfaction and evaluation of the performance of the reviewers, the Agency conducts a feedback survey after each review. The feedback questionnaire is automatically generated and sent to the members of the review panel after the end of the review. All review panel members participate in the feedback survey and evaluate each other, their work with the SAAHE IS, and the work of the assigned Agency staff member. The Agency uses this feedback to evaluate the work of individual RP members at the end of each specific proceeding. The feedback is evaluated, and the results are utilized as recommendations for improving external quality assurance processes. Moreover, feedback information is helpful during future review panel composition proposals.

Standard 2.4 – Reflection and challenges

External quality assurance by SAAHE is carried out by Review Panels serving as groups of external experts, and each of them include at least one student member.

The Agency is continuously improving its approach to the development of the list of reviewers and focusing on its qualitative aspect. It is moving from extensive recruitment to targeted addressing of suitable experts.

Given the size of the country and the number of higher education institutions in its territory, it is important to consider the risk of linkages between institutions and reviewers when creating the review panel. In this respect, the increased involvement of international

reviewers, mainly from the Czech Republic so far, has proven to be successful. Their involvement has enhanced the impartiality of the respective review panel. The Agency plans to also involve international reviewers in the composition of review panels for the institutional accreditations of higher education institutions. In order to avoid misunderstandings due to unfamiliarity with the Slovak legal framework and practices, more specific training for this group of reviewers is planned.

6.5 ESG standard 2.5 – Criteria for outcomes

Standard 2.5

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

All outcomes or judgements made by SAAHE as a result of the external quality assurance are based on explicit and published requirements – Standards for the Internal System, and Standards for Study Programme. The consistent application of these is secured by the [Methodology for the evaluation of standards](#). The methodology for the evaluation of standards is in accordance with § 4 (2) (e) of the Quality Assurance Act. As defined in Section 2(d) of the Act, it is a set of procedures, criteria, and indicators through which the Agency's Executive Board review panels and Agency staff evaluate the implementation of standards and measures to ensure compliance with the standards. Verification of compliance with the standards for the internal system can be considered as an external part of quality assurance of higher education within the meaning of the ESG. The procedures, criteria, and indicators set out in this methodology shall be applied appropriately depending on the type, requirements, and nature of the proceeding. The activities of the proceedings under the Quality Assurance Act shall be governed by separate subsequent regulations and guidelines of the Agency.

For a better understanding of the methodology and standards, SAAHE has for the second consecutive year organised common online events for representatives of higher education institutions. In addition, various enhancement activities have been conducted for individual schools to explain and discuss the application procedures, the creation of institution internal assessment reports, the criteria for evaluating compliance with the standards, and other uncertainties and issues related to the accreditation processes.

The application and interpretation of the evaluation criteria in the reviews is also part of the training of the external expert members of the review panels at the beginning of each evaluation and, where appropriate, during the evaluation. Support for these experts is provided by the staff member of the Accreditation Department (AD) assigned to the proceeding. This staff member, in addition to organising the whole procedure, also ensures the training of the review panel members with regard to the correct and consistent interpretation of the standards. The assigned staff member of the AD shall assist the chair of the review panel to ensure that the site visit is conducted in an appropriate manner and that all necessary aspects are discussed.

It is clear that training of the assigned AD staff is key to ensure a consistent application of the standards. Therefore, training meetings are conducted by the head of the department, the IQA staff, or the Agency management. The weekly AD meetings also explain and discuss the more problematic parts of the standards and clarify any confusion that may have arisen that week. Outside of these meetings, department staff has detailed manuals for each type of proceeding in which they can find descriptions of each step and the procedures needed to complete those steps. Templates for documents related to reviewing compliance with the standards are also included.

Following the submission of the evaluation report by the review panel, the assigned AD staff member will prepare a presentation report for the Executive Board meeting containing background information on the proceeding, a draft resolution, and links to the main documents of the proceeding in the Agency's information system. The report shall be made available to the members of the Executive Board at least eight days before the meeting. For the programme accreditation, it is normally two weeks before the meeting. In addition to the presentation report, the assigned staff member, together with the Head of Accreditation Department, will prepare a report on the conduct of the whole proceeding, summarising the main findings, recommendations, shortcomings, or examples of good practice cited and will present the individual proceedings directly to the Executive Board in this way. During the discussion before the actual decision, the assigned staff member of the Accreditation Department shall be available for any supplementary questions or additional clarification.

Standard 2.5 – Reflection and challenges

All outcomes or judgements made by SAAHE as a result of the external quality assurance are based on explicit and published criteria – Standards for the Internal System, Standards for Study Programme, Methodology, and other regulation and are applied consistently.

Based on the experience from the first accreditations of new study programmes, feedback collected from different stakeholders involved in this process, and changes resulting from the amendment of the Higher Education Act and related regulations the Agency adopted and approved the modification of the Methodology for the evaluation of Standards. This regulation framework will be applied consistently to all institutions.

6.6 ESG standard 2.6 – Reporting

Standard 2.6

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners, and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

Providing information to the general public on the quality of higher education institutions and their study programmes is one of the basic tasks of external quality assurance. SAAHE publishes on its website the full applications of higher education institutions, the

evaluation reports of the review panels, the documents for decisions, the statement of the Agency, the statement of the Agency's Board of Appeal, the Agency's decisions and statements on applications, the statements of the Board of Appeal and the resolutions of the Agency's bodies.

Publication of the above materials is also required by § 4 (h) of the Quality Assurance Act. The evaluation reports of the review panels are published after their discussion in the Executive Board, and the decisions after they have become final. This goes equally for programme accreditation, institutional accreditation and state approval proceedings as well.

The published evaluation reports of the review panels contain basic identification data about the institution and the study programmes, information about the proceeding, evaluation procedures, reviewed documents, site visit and participating persons, evaluation of the fulfilment of individual standards, recommendations for the institution, and examples of good practice or shortcomings. The review panel concludes with a draft decision or statement for the Executive Board. *The Agency also publishes evaluation reports and decisions in other types of proceedings conducted under previous regulations.* In order to ensure consistency of evaluation reports, the Agency uses a model evaluation report.

The obligation to publish the evaluation reports stems from the Quality Assurance Act, but at the same time, their publication gives a wider range of persons the opportunity to get acquainted with their content. Interest in the content of published evaluation reports has been expressed by the reviewed institutions, other higher education institutions, students or potential future students, and other stakeholders. The evaluation reports are published together with the subsequent decisions of the Executive Board.

The designated staff of the Accreditation Department coordinating the different reviews provide the necessary support to the members of the review panel in the drafting of the evaluation reports and checking their completeness. Responsibility for the content, conclusions, and evaluation, compliance or not compliance with the standards, rests with the members of the review panel. The production of the evaluation reports by external experts supports the principle of the evaluation being completed only by such persons.

The evaluation report shall be sent to the institution for comments before the Executive Board takes a decision. This statement shall be submitted as one of the decision-making documents to the Executive Board.

An identified difficulty of the first evaluation reports was the ambiguous wording of findings and shortcomings, which complicated the formulation of decisions. This problem is characteristic for many reviewers who are experts in the field of study but do not normally use the wording and conclusions typical of the audit style of expression. The Agency is addressing improvements in this area by training, or by selecting reviewers who have proven themselves in this area.

Standard 2.6 – Reflection and challenges

Full reports of the review panels are published on the Agency's website to be clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners, and other interested individuals. The agency generally takes a formal decision based on these reports. The respective full decisions are published on the Agency's website as well.

The first experiences with the evaluation reports for the accreditation of study programmes, as well as the feedback from the stakeholders involved in the accreditations (members of the review panels, those responsible for the study programme, those responsible for quality, as well as the Agency staff who led the different proceedings), have brought first comments and suggestions for modifying the evaluation reports. Some of them have been incorporated into the already published evaluation reports, others will be used in draft of the evaluation reports for institutional accreditation.

In order to ensure the consistency of the evaluation reports, and the use of legally unquestionable statements as a basis for decisions, training of reviewers is planned. This will include training in the writing of evaluation reports, the description of identified deficiencies, and the justification of these solely on the basis of the standards.

6.7 ESG standard 2.7 – Complaints and appeals

Standard 2.7

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

In order to protect the rights of higher education institutions and ensure fair decision-making, external quality assurance is carried out in an open and accountable manner. Nevertheless, misunderstandings or dissatisfaction with the process or its official results may arise. Procedures must be in place for institutions to raise objections to the Agency, and the Agency must deal with complaints in a professional manner through a clearly defined and transparent process that is applied consistently. Using the complaints procedure, institutions can express their dissatisfaction with the process or the individuals who conducted it. During the appeal procedure, the institution may challenge the official results of the process, pointing out that the results are not based on reliable evidence, the criteria were not applied appropriately, or the processes were not followed consistently. These challenges are considered by the Board of Appeal, which is an Agency body.

On the basis of generally binding legislation (apart from appeals), the Agency is obliged, like any other public authority, to examine any complaint. The Slovak legal system distinguishes between two types of complaints dealt with outside of the Quality Assurance Act, namely complaints against an anti-social act of an employee and complaints against any procedure/action or inaction of an employee. The procedure for dealing with any action is regulated by generally binding regulations as well as by the Agency's internal regulations, namely the SAAHE [Directive on the Handling of Complaints](#) and the [Directive on the Internal System of Verification of Notifications of Anti-social Activities](#) of SAAHE. To date, the Agency has not received any of these complaints, i.e., complaints not falling under the regime regulated by the Quality Assurance Act.

The Board of Appeal shall examine the procedures of the Executive Board and the review panels of the Executive Board of the Agency based on the appeals lodged by a proceeding's party to the decisions or statements of the Executive Board. The Board of Appeal shall consist of five members and two alternates, appointed, and dismissed by the Minister of Education following a selection process. A member of the Board of Appeal shall

act independently in the proceedings and shall not be bound by the orders of the person who proposed him/her for an appointment or of the person who appointed him/her. The term of office of a member of the Board of Appeal shall be four years. The same person may serve a maximum of two terms as a member of the Board of Appeal. A person who is unimpeachable, appropriately qualified, and has the full legal capacity to act may be appointed as a member of the Board of Appeal. At least three members of the Board of Appeal shall have a master's degree in law with at least five years of professional experience in the field of law. The other two members of the Board of Appeal must have served for at least five years as a professor or associate professor at a university and need not be lawyers.

The Ministry of Education shall announce a selection process for filling the position of a member of the Board of Appeal not later than 90 days before the expiry of the term of office of the respective member of the Board of Appeal. If the term of office of a member of the Board of Appeal terminates before its scheduled expiry, the selection process shall be announced within 30 days of the expiry. The selection committee for the selection process for filling the position of a member of the Board of Appeal shall be appointed by the Minister of Education; one member on the proposal of the Council of Higher Education Institutions, one member on the proposal of the Slovak Rectors' Conference and one member on the proposal of the Student Council of Higher Education. The Ministry of Education shall publish the result of the selection process on its website within ten days of its completion.

A member of the Board of Appeal shall be replaced by an alternate if he or she has been excluded from the consideration of the case due to potential bias or conflict of interest. The procedural process of the Board of Appeal shall be governed by an internal regulation called the [Rules of Procedure of the Board of Appeal](#) and shall be based on the Quality Assurance Act. The Rules of Procedure shall be adopted by the Board of Appeal after the prior opinion of the Executive Board.

The higher education institution as a proceeding's party shall have the right to lodge complaints/appeals against the decision or the statement of the Agency within 15 working days from the date on which the decision or the statement was delivered to the proceeding's party, i.e., the institution, which shall be notified in advance by the Agency to the proceeding's party in the decision or the statement. The Board of Appeal shall take a decision on the party's appeals within 90 days from the date of receiving by the Agency.

The Board of Appeal cannot reverse the Agency's decision but can only remand for reconsideration or affirm the original decision. If in reviewing the decision or statement of the Agency, the Board of Appeal finds that the Agency's internal rules governing the procedure of the Executive Board, its review panels, or the Quality Assurance Act have not been complied with, it shall refer the decision or statement back to the Executive Board for reconsideration, otherwise, it shall uphold the decision or statement of the Agency. If the Board of Appeal remands the decision or statement to the Executive Board for reconsideration, a new time limit shall begin, and the institution's proceedings shall begin anew.

A member of the Executive Board, the chair of the relevant review panel (or his/her delegate), and one or two representatives of the institution concerned shall be entitled to attend the meeting of the Board of Appeal to hear the objections. The right to be present shall not apply to the part of the meeting where the vote is taken. The Board of Appeal shall give

the appellant at least ten working days' notice of the place, date, and time of the hearing of the objections. The Board of Appeal may invite other persons to attend its meetings, as necessary. If the person entitled does not attend the meeting of the Board of Appeal, the Board of Appeal shall hear the case without its presence.

The Board of Appeal shall adopt its conclusions in the form of resolutions only at its meeting. The meeting may also be held by videoconference or by other means of information and communication technology without the physical presence of the members of the Board of Appeal. A decision of the Board of Appeal shall be adopted if a majority of members of the Board of Appeal (at least three votes) are in favour of its adoption. Failure of the Board of Appeal to adopt a resolution shall constitute an affirmation of the decision or an affirmation of the Agency's statement. The decisions of the Board of Appeal, as well as the supporting documents for those decisions, shall be published on the Agency's website.

The Board of Appeal has so far dealt with two types of proceedings, namely appeals against a biased member of the review panel and an appeal against the rejection of an application for accreditation of a study programme. In both of the two appeal procedures regarding bias of a member of the review panel, the Board of Appeal ruled against the complainant, which was the institution under review. In the appeal procedure against the rejection of an application for accreditation of a study programme, the Board of Appeal upheld the decision of the procedure's party – the higher education institution - and remanded the rejection decision of the Executive Board as the first instance body for a new procedure. As of the date of this report, the Board of Appeal has dealt with a total of three appeals.

Standard 2.7 – Reflection and challenges

Complaints and appeals procedures are defined by the Quality Assurance Act as a part of the design of external quality assurance processes and the possibility to lodge an appeal is communicated to the institution explicitly in each individual decision.

From the experience of the Board of Appeals decision-making practice to date, consideration will need to be given to the manner in which its members are selected, particularly in the context of the public law experience associated with working in a higher education environment.

Another challenge is to reduce the length of individual proceedings and to anchor procedural processes in the formulation of decisions that should be properly reasoned on the one hand, but exclusively with an ESG-compliant view of the Agency's processes without too much analogy to the decision-making of the general courts. The recent amendment to the Quality Assurance Act, effective from 25 April 2022, reflects some of these aspects and gives hope for speeding up and simplifying the procedures for objections of bias against members of the Review Panel.

7. OPINIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS

SAAHE attaches large importance to collaboration with its stakeholders and cultivates an active dialogue with them. This cooperation has helped significantly to adopt the new concept of quality assurance of higher education in Slovakia and to clarify its objectives and methods of implementation. From the early beginning of the Agency's existence, it has focused mainly on principal stakeholder representations: the Council of Higher Education Institutions, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Student Council for Higher Education Institutions, the Ministry and the employers and professional associations (e.g., National Union of Employers, Alliance of Sector Councils).

As we have specified in section 5.1 the main areas of stakeholder involvement are the governance and accreditation activities of the Agency. Naturally, an important role of stakeholders is to participate and/or to comment on the development of strategic documents of the Agency. Thus, the draft SAR was submitted to, and subsequently discussed with the above-mentioned stakeholder representations. Mutual discussions and meetings took place to explore the issues, to monitor the level of satisfaction with the Agency's work and to identify areas of potential improvement. Outcomes from this activity were incorporated into the final version of a self-assessment report.

The Slovak Rectors' Conference and the Council of Higher Education Institutions represent the voice of the academic community, mainly on the governance level. High education institutions are facing new challenges introduced by the new framework of quality assurance. They stress the important role of impartiality in the choice of review panel members and the subsequent processes. This is likely to be relevant mainly in institutions with small and unique study programmes. Moreover, the higher education institutions emphasize and call for smart review processes with as little additional workload as possible. They recommend decreasing the volume of non-standard documents supplied as evidence on their performance. An important issue raised by a majority of higher education institutions is the lack of money and an increase of administration. Needless to say, these issues are outside the remit of SAAHE, and the increase of administration is a transitional consequence of a new legal framework introduced in April 2022 by an amendment to the Higher Education Act.

The Student Council for Higher Education Institutions represents the voice of students and has an important weight within the stakeholders' community. The new concept of quality assurance increased the importance of students' awareness of education processes and their results. The Agency urges an active participation and engagement of students in the review panels stimulate their interest in quality assurance and helps to reveal the main topics of their interest. As mentioned in section 5.4 the Agency conducted a large survey mapping satisfaction of students in Slovakia with their studies and student life. It is planned that some of the results will be used by the review panels as topics to focus on.

A specific voice within stakeholders is represented by employers and professional associations. Unlike other stakeholders, the employers have not been engaged so closely with the previous concept of higher education quality assurance in Slovakia. SAAHE has been cooperating closely with the Union of Employers and, above all with the Alliance of Sector Councils. This institution was established by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic and its core activities are monitoring of the current requirements of the labour market and forecasting its development. Members of the Alliance are all relevant ministries and the majority of key employers' organizations.

The common issues among employers are the HEIs weak reflection of the labour market and the lack of practical abilities of graduates. The first issue is quite outside the scope of responsibilities of HEIs or the Agency. As far as the second issue, the presence of employer representatives in the review panel creates the possibility to partially overcome this gap.

To conclude, SAAHE has paid great attention to the stakeholder remarks. Many of them are reflected in this document and many of them will be used in further optimization of SAAHE processes.

8. SWOT analysis

SWOT analysis is part of the strategic planning of SAAHE. It provides important additive information from the Agency's internal and external environment and is the basis for the development of the Agency's strategic development plan and is periodically reviewed in the annual internal system evaluation process. Its outputs are also taken into account in the reflection on standards and in the specification and articulation of challenges in the further operation and improvement of the Agency.

A SWOT analysis is carried out periodically in the process of self-evaluation of the Agency's internal system and is composed from Agency staff and, Executive Board members' inputs in cooperation with other stakeholders.

The collection and evaluation of staff views were conducted anonymously between January 19, 2022, and January 24, 2022. Fourteen agency staff participated. Employee statements were categorized into internal environment assessment categories (categories used to evaluate strengths and weaknesses) and external environment assessment categories (used to evaluate opportunities and threats). Based on the frequencies of opinions in each category, ranking was determined indicating the importance of the respective category in compiling the final SWOT and defining the SAAHE goals from the employees' perspective.

A separate category was generated for the Executive Board members. The initiation of data collection in this category was agreed in the Executive Board meeting held on 19 May 2022. This process was not anonymous and was easier to process due to a lower number of participants and smaller variance in the individual inputs.

The integration of the results consisted of unifying the different data sets and assigning weights based on frequencies of opinions, and thus the importance, to the overall result. In this case, the work was more complicated due to the higher subjectivity of the staff perspective than in the case of the collective of Executive Board members. The resulting opinions were subsequently edited for stylistic consistency and wording.

Strengths

1. Solid legal framework for quality assurance in higher education
2. Autonomous agency with both, institutional as well as operational independency
3. Human resources, competent staff
4. The ability to focus higher education institutions on quality assurance of education guidance and clarification of standards and the need of quality reform
5. Experience in study programme accreditation based on the ESG-compliant standards
6. Professional enhancement events for higher education institutions
7. Full digitisation of processes
8. Response to changing conditions (e.g., pandemic issues, changes in legislation)
9. An increasing share of financial revenue from other sources than the state budget

Weaknesses

1. Short history of the Agency, limited practical experience with the external quality assurance
2. Lack of independent reviewers regarding complex coverage of the fields of study in a small country hence the risk of conflicts of interest
3. Inconsistencies in some of the evaluation reports of the review panels (discrepancies between findings and conclusions)
4. Only the first PDCA cycle in the Agency internal quality assurance system
5. Low user-friendliness of the information system
6. Low visibility of the Agency and its activities in the mass media
7. Dependence of the Agency's financing on the state budget

Opportunities

1. Opportunity to significantly improve the quality of higher education in Slovakia through the introduction and use of quality assurance mechanisms
2. Increasing the quality of services and recognition of SAAHE by undergoing the ENQA Agency Review
3. Increasing the attractiveness of Slovak higher education institutions by compliance with European standards and guidelines for higher education
4. International cooperation and platforms for the exchange of information and experience with similar institutions abroad (e.g., ENQA, V4QA Forum, etc.)
5. Possibility to share experienced reviewers with other international agencies (V4QA Forum)
6. Closer connection of higher education institutions with the social and economic needs of the society
7. Convergent adjustment of factors affecting the quality of higher education (accreditation, funding, legislation, stakeholders)

Threats

1. Reduction of funding for higher education institutions and SAAHE - threatening both quality reform and quality of education
2. Unpredictable changes in state higher education policies (legislation and financing)
3. Misunderstanding of the nature of changes in the internal quality assurance of education in the academic environment in Slovakia
4. Lack of capacity and unwillingness of external stakeholders to actively participate in the processes of quality assurance of education
5. Staff changes in the dynamic labour market in Bratislava
6. Divergent policies affecting the quality of higher education (accreditation, funding, legislation, stakeholders)
7. Gaps in common understanding of QA in higher education (e.g., ESG approach encouraging the accountability of HEIs in QA contrary to restrictive approach expected by some policy makers and media in Slovakia)

9. KEY CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education was established by the Quality Assurance Act in 2018 and has completed its first three years of operation. During this period, it has actively participated in shaping the Slovak higher education area, as evidenced by the results reflected in this report.

Having completed 177 proceedings for accreditation of new study programmes by implementing ESG standards, SAAHE is now well prepared for the assessment of internal quality assurance systems of Slovak higher education institutions. This task in connection with the latest extensive change of the Higher Education Act (effective from 25 April 2022) is the major challenge for the Agency.

The above-mentioned new legislative environment has significantly affected above all the system of management and administration of higher education institutions. The system of appointing to the posts of university teachers has also been significantly changed. These legislative changes have induced the need of systematic review and change of internal regulations and management processes within the higher education institutions. However, the accreditation system and the deadlines have remained unchanged. The institutions will thus be obliged to request the Agency to assess the compliance of their internal system with the standards by the end of 2022 at the latest. For the Agency, which represents a stable element in the higher education system in Slovakia, this represents a major challenge for the next period of operation, in which the Agency has the ambition to actively participate.

The Quality Assurance Act obliges the Agency to apply for membership in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and to seek registration in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) in 2022. Such inclusion in international structures is also an ambition of the SAAHE management. We are confident, that all staff of the Agency are actively participating to fulfil the preconditions for achieving this goal.

10. CONCLUSION

The submitted self-assessment report provides information on the Agency's activities in the area of its legal scope of activity, which is the assessment of the quality of higher education institutions in Slovakia in its entire complexity. The Agency, especially in 2021, fully implemented its mission and carried out external quality assurance activities of higher education institutions on the basis of a legal framework determined by the Quality Assurance Act. Its activities were mainly focused on procedures of programme accreditation with a total of 177 new study programmes having been processed to date. In addition to this there have also been carried out decisions within the transient period, e. g. 30 approvals with programme modifications and 646 prior approvals ahead of programmes being modified.

This self-assessment report reflects the extent of fulfilment of the ESG standards, and the procedures determined by them. It assesses the results achieved, critically reflects on weaknesses, and highlights the main challenges in each area.

The Agency is now well positioned to move to the next phase of planned activity which is the assessment of internal quality assurance systems of Slovak higher education institutions.

We believe that the report as presented meets the requirements for this type of documents and can be used as a basis for the evaluation of SAAHE in the process of admission as a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and for the purpose of registration with the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). We believe that the Agency's activities and performance to date provide a convincing basis for the fulfilment of this objective.

11. LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Agency	Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education
AD	Accreditation Department
EB	Executive Board
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
FAQ	Frequently Asked Questions
Higher Education Act	Act No. 131/2002 Coll. on Higher Education and on the amendment to certain acts, as amended
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IS SAAVS	Information System of the The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education
Ministry	Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic
QA	Quality Assurance
Quality Assurance Act	Act No. 269/2018 Coll. on Quality Assurance of Higher Education and amendment of Act No. 343/2015 Coll. on Public Procurement and amendment of certain acts, as amended
RP	Review Panel
SAAHE	Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education
SEQA ESG	Supporting European quality assurance agencies in meeting the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in EHEA
V4QA-Forum	Forum for quality assurance of higher education in the V4 (Visegrad) countries

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Bratislava, November 2022

This Self-assessment report of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education was approved by the Executive Board on 20 October 2022 and can be accessed at www.saavs.sk